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Reconstructing Rationality: A Hermeneutic Alternative to Evidentialism and Reformed Epistemology Using Themes from Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Ricoeur

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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We live in a culture divided between dogmatism and relativism. This division arises, in large part, from competing rationalities—a plurality of beliefs about what is true or good. This dichotomy is particularly manifest as regards the diversity of religious truth claims. By outlining a mechanism of inter-cultural justification of beliefs the dissertation addresses how it is possible to adjudicate diverse rationalities without appealing to Enlightenment notions of evidence or Reformed epistemologies.

The Enlightenment demanded that religious beliefs be justified by evidence acceptable to all; the Reformed epistemologists argued that religious beliefs are justified by "properly basic beliefs" produced by the proper functioning of God given faculties. These two popular philosophical approaches, the dissertation argues, are inadequate to the bridging the contemporary culture divide. Moreover, the dissertation argues that the rejection of Enlightenment principles of rationality in favor of a hermeneutic model will not lead to skepticism or relativism.

Utilizing the resources of the hermeneutic school, it is argued that understanding justification as eminently context dependent, yet intelligible (in principle) to any potential interlocutor, allows for a robust understanding of rationality without falling into either dogmatism or relativism.

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Introduction

This dissertation addresses a question familiar in our pluralistic society: how do we adjudicate inter-cultural disagreements?[1] It is often taken for granted that varying social groups have different ways of understanding the world, and correspondingly, different values, norms and practices of justification. And indeed, cultures ostensibly have quite different beliefs about what is true, what is good and what is right. Additionally, different cultures have produced disparate religious traditions that have a variety of incompatible beliefs about the divine, and thus incompatible ways of talking about God. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim that the ultimate reality is personal, Hindus believe the ultimate reality is the impersonal Brahman, and Buddhists and atheists believe there is no ultimate deity. Pantheists identify God with the cosmos, some believing that the ultimate reality is like a life-force, drawing living beings with spiritual qualities up from simple matter. Muslims and Jews believe that God is One, while Christians maintain that God, while being One in substance, is also a Trinity. In this dissertation I will focus on the way the problem of adjudicating disagreements manifests itself in the problem of religious diversity, although, I believe, the solution I offer can be mapped onto any inter-cultural dispute.

The problem of religious diversity arises because different religions maintain mutually exclusive beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality. It is a problem because of the intellectual

[1] Here I construe 'culture' in a broad and non-technical sense, signifying a variety of traditions, religious or philosophical systems as well as any cohesive system of reason and value.

tension brought about by the apparent disagreement among rational individuals. It is easy to countenance disagreement when one of the two sides is ignorant of or resistant to relevant facts, or when the disagreement is about mere matters of taste. But sincere disagreement among informed people about beliefs as momentous as the meaning or purpose of life, the existence of God, eternal souls and the afterlife does (and ought to) produce intellectual tension. Many undergraduates confront such clashes in belief first hand when they come to college. They may have had some exposure to others with differing beliefs earlier in life, but coming to college and learning about and meeting sincere practitioners of other faiths is often unsettling to religious believers. Moreover, as schools at all levels turn away from confessional modes of teaching (i.e., "this is what we as X believe..." and how it relates to everything taught) and towards information based teaching about religion (i.e., "this is what these people believe and this is what these other people believe..."), each religion or way of life appears to be on a par with one another.[2] The combination between awareness of diversity and the apparent sincerity and rationality of practitioners of other faiths often results in acute intellectual and spiritual tension.

Of course the difficulty students face is a manifestation of a more general problem of the clash of worldviews in pluralistic societies. Indeed, given the fact of a plurality of worldviews[3], students, and societies, are pushed towards a bifurcation between skepticism and relativism, on the one hand, and fundamentalism and dogmatism on the other. Some are led by the fact of a plurality of religious worldviews and the apparent parity between them to conclude that religious, philosophical and moral beliefs are a matter of arbitrary opinion. No one religion or

[2] It is important to note that at this point I am not praising or condemning this change in education, but simply describing a cultural shift.

[3] When I use the word 'worldview' here I am again using it in an everyday, non-technical sense. The question of whether different beliefs give rise to different experiences – such that the world appears differently to members of different cultures – has not yet been raised.

worldview is more justified than another; one's choice between them is thus effectively a matter of taste, not one that could be the result of rational choice. Others react to diversity by shutting their minds and dogmatically reasserting – often with no particular justification, but just as a result of a kind of "religious patriotism" – an invincible confidence in the superiority of the beliefs with which they were raised.[4] A multiplicity of systems of value that seem more or less rationally on a par with one another almost inevitably leads, if not to dogmatism, to either skepticism or relativism. The question before us, then, is this: How is one to adjudicate disagreements between a multiplicity of religious traditions, each of which has unique, and sincerely held rational beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality? Further, is it possible to do justice to the plurality of religious values as well as the self-understanding of religious believers, while still maintaining a robust account of rationality? How can one judge a system of beliefs to be superior to another? I suggest that what is needed is a mechanism for discerning better and worse religious beliefs. If we could develop a mechanism for such discernment – even in principle – then we would no longer have to see religious beliefs as merely an arbitrary choice between equals. If successful, we will be able to counteract the natural tendency towards the false bifurcation between dogmatism, on the one hand, and relativism and skepticism on the other. In short, what is needed is a new account of rationality.

But perhaps some will object that I am already moving too fast. It might be assuming too much at the outset to say that there *is* a problem of religious diversity. What grounds do we have for thinking that there is a real disagreement between religious systems? Indeed, one might wish to forgo the problem of religious diversity by proposing so-called "anti-realist" accounts of

[4] Yet others, concerned with having reasons for their beliefs, but finding traditional modes of justification weigh against them, produce new *forms* of justification in order to promote their own beliefs, such as Scientific Creationism.

religious language. One might say, for instance, that religious claims, rather than expressing a fact about the *world*, are really expressions of *emotional* states in the subject. Most contemporary forms of anti-realism, such as Freud's notion that God is nothing more than a father-figure projected as the result of wish-fulfillment, have grown out of Ludwig Feuerbach's work, *The Essence of Christianity*. To make the distinction between realist and anti-realist accounts of religious language clear, we might say that realists accept the Tarskian biconditional

'*p*' is true if and only if, *p*,

where '*p*' is a variable that represents any statement such as "snow is white," "The Eagles will win the Super Bowl this year," or more complex, less (at least empirically) verifiable claims like "God exists." Thus, the above bicondiational can be cashed out, for the first proposition, as follows:

the statement "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is (in fact, actually) white.

Or again,

"God exists" is true if and only if God does in fact exist.

An anti-realist, on the other hand, will assert that the truth-maker (i.e., the reality that makes the statement true) for the statement "*p*" could be something other than *p* itself – *r*, let's say. Correspondingly for the anti-realist, "God exists" could be made true by something other than God's existence. In the case of Feuerbach, the statement "God exists" is not made true by God's objective existence outside of human thought, but rather the statement is understood to signify something like,

"God exists" means "humans value justice and goodness."

The belief in God is understood as an externalization and anthropomorphization of our cherished values. These values tend to be thought of as an objective entity, but God is really nothing more than a projection of our subjective values, emotional sentiments or social constructions. Hence, the statement "God exists" is made true if humans value justice and goodness, not by God's objective existence. One can see then why anti-realist philosophers think that if there is a problem of religious diversity at all, it is only because people fail to realize the true nature of religious assertions, which are in fact only reflections of their speakers subjective values, not claims about the objective facts, the "furniture of the universe" so to speak.

Or one might say that religious language, unlike scientific or empirical claims, is not interested truth claims at all; indeed, religious proclamations are not susceptible of truth or falsity in the ordinary sense. This appears to be Wittgenstein's interpretation of religious language.[5] Think, for example, about how different the language-games that contain the statements "there is an airplane overhead" and "God created all of this [referring to the surrounding world]" respectively, must be.[6] For instance, if someone counters the latter claim by claiming that God surely didn't physically fashion the flower that just bloomed yesterday, the religious speaker can always respond, "Well, I didn't mean it *literally*." If a person responded to the former claim by saying, "No, that's not an airplane, what you hear is a helicopter, one would not retort, "Well, I

[5] Nathan Hilberg, in a seminar I attended, argued compellingly that Wittgenstein should not be lumped in with anti-realists such as Feuerbach because he treats religious language as non-cognitive and so employs the term 'irrealist' when speaking about Wittgenstein to mark this distinction. I agree with this assessment, but for the present purposes it is sufficient to use the traditional realist/anti-realist dichotomy.

[6] This is a variation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 53: " Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgment,' and I said: 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly.' You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said 'There is a German aeroplane overhead,' and I said 'Possibly I'm not so sure,' you'd say we were fairly near."

didn't mean that *literally*." Religious claims, for Wittgenstein, have an odd function and one that is not susceptible to ordinary falsification, but is part and parcel of a way of orienting one's beliefs, feelings and actions. Religious speech is thus an *expression* of a way of life, and does not make truth claims about an objective reality. This understanding of religious language also would avoid the problem of religious diversity – after all, if this account of language is the right one, then one is not placed in the position of saying one or both of the claimants is wrong. They could all be correct "in their own way" or "in their own sphere" or, more modestly, "when appropriately understood." The members of the conversation would not be making competing claims about the same reality.

Some forms of anti-realism, it is true, do circumvent the problem of there being a plurality of religious truth claims. One can imagine how the Feuerbachian solution would work. The primary claim of monotheism that God is one can be made compatible with polytheism if we take both claims to be expressions of cultural valuation of justice, goodness and the like. Perhaps, culturally, it made more sense to identify each value with a separate deity rather than unifying them. But clearly the two systems mean the same; and indeed, the two have the same truth-maker. We can say that both claims are true without any inconsistency. Hence, the two faiths really don't disagree, and we need not bother ourselves about which religion is superior.

One might think that anti-realist views of religious language are foist upon us by the tension created by countenancing competing claims of different religions. But I do not think that anti-realism is helpful in getting out of the problem of adjudicating inter-cultural disagreements. Indeed, in the example I have just mentioned, notice what we have done to the language of both religious believers. Anti-realists successfully circumvent the problem of religious diversity only at the cost of being revisionary. By "revisionary" I mean that one understands the language of

religious believers differently than they ordinarily do themselves. Typically, when a religious believer says that God exists (or, correspondingly that God is One, or that there are many gods), they take this to be a statement about reality. For most believers, the truth of the statement "God exists" entails that God exists independently of human thought, just as one would unreflectively say that "this chair I am sitting on exists" entails there is a chair that exists independently of my thought.[7] By saying that "God exists" can be made true by emotive sentiments like "I value justice," or that this statement isn't susceptible to ordinary conditions of truth and falsity is to radically change what religious believers mean when they speak, and what they take their sacred texts to mean. Furthermore, many religious believers take *themselves* to be at odds with one another. Is it not the height of arrogance, to attempt to end a debate between a devout Muslim and a devout Jew by assuring them that they don't actually disagree with one another, and to inform them that what they really mean is something unrecognizable to both parties? Nor is it "tolerant" to suggest that both sides in the debate are right when this is clearly not what the disputants themselves think: they would not be arguing unless they thought the other side was, in some sense, actually wrong.[8] Changing the meaning of their words in such a way that they no longer disagree with one another is to do violence to the words of both speakers. Surely there is nothing more *in*tolerant than telling someone else what they mean and patronizingly tell them, "oh, you *think* you mean that, but you really don't." This revisionism is an undesirable, but

[7] Of course I am not suggesting that most religious believers think that God is just another physical piece of "furniture" in the universe – one that could be physically seen if we point our telescopes in the right direction. Empirically, I doubt that many educated religious believers think anything like this. Rather, I mean that God's existence is not constituted in any part by human knowledge of God, that God exists independently of the existence of human beings of their thoughts or beliefs about God.

[8] Of course this is not to dismiss the possibility that, from a third person perspective, one might be able to tell that the two disputing parties do not in fact understand one another and that they really do not disagree.

unavoidable, result of anti-realist accounts of religious language, hence the anti-realist account of language is not a plausible solution to the problem of religious diversity.

Instead, I propose as an interpretive principle that one ought to preserve an understanding of the believer's words that is maximally recognizable to the believer as being his or her own.[9] We could call such an interpretative principle, the *Principle of Faithfulness*.[10] This principle immediately points, in ordinary cases, to a form of realism in our interpretation of religious

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[9] It is quite legitimate to question the value of simply taking believers' natural understanding of their own language as the right one. Surely philosophers are meant to correct, not simply clarify the speech of religious believers. I think there is some merit to this and some of my argument will be analogous to Husserl's move from the "natural attitude" towards an understanding of the constitutive role of the subject in experience. The end result may not leave the naive realism of the ordinary religious believer entirely intact (indeed I think it will largely remain intact), but I believe it should nonetheless serve as the starting point. After all, the problem of religious diversity, as a subset of the problem of how to adjudicate inter-cultural disagreements – is a live problem between religious believers. Telling them at the outset that they don't believe what they think they believe is not productive.

[10] In effect, interpretation balances what Donald Davidson calls the *Principle of Charity* with what I have called a *Principle of Faithfulness*. As discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3, when interpretation begins, we begin on the Davidsonian ground that we can't make sense of the claim that I, or my interlocutor, is radically wrong about the nature of reality. In other words, we must be largely in agreement with reality and with each other. Therefore, the Principle of Charity directs us to ascribe the maximal amount of truth to another's language; this governs the process of developing a translation manual, of coming to an initial understanding of the other. But interpretation eventually transitions from linking up beliefs to what the interpreter holds to be true to linking up beliefs to what we know the other person holds to be true. Again, while it is because we largely agree with one another about reality that translation gets off the ground, this is also while we can locally disagree with one another. It is only on the basis of this much more substantial agreement that disagreement even makes sense. The more agreement, the more "bite" disagreement has. Somewhere along the line the Principle of Charity will mix with the Principle of Faithfulness until they bear roughly equal weight in the work of interpretation. The Principle of Faithfulness has the explicit goal of interpreting the other on the basis of what we know they hold to be true, so of course it cannot be functioning at the outset when we do not know how to translate their language. And it is this principle that prevents us from merely ascribing our own beliefs whole-sale onto the other. To put it another way, the Principle of Charity is necessary in radical interpretation (where we know nothing of the language of our interlocutor), the Principle of Faithfulness comes into play once we have largely interpreted their beliefs upon those of our own that we hold true.

language. This means that religious claims, like the claims of physics or chemistry, are (albeit in a somewhat different way) statements about the real world. For example, religious claims about the work of the deity imply, minimally, the existential proposition "God exists." These claims are not meant simply as statements about what they value as individuals, nor are they meant as being very different from the claim about their being an airplane overhead (though religious believers don't think a telescope would be helpful in finding God). Of course, maintaining a kind of realism about religious language such that religious statements are susceptible to being true or false puts us in a position of dealing directly with the problem of religious diversity. That is, as soon as one takes religious language as making claims about the world that are either true or false, one must immediately recognize that various traditions make varying and mutually exclusive claims about reality. When this happens, at least one, or perhaps both, of the claimants must be wrong. This is, of course, the cost that religious realists are willing to pay. Religious beliefs, just like other beliefs, are taken to be about the nature of reality. And when one makes a claim about objective truth, one is not making a claim that is merely true "for me." In staking a claim to religious truth one is thus implicitly claiming that this is true of the world *out there*, so to speak. Religious realism, where only one of competing mutually exclusive truth claims can be true, seems to me to be the most natural way of understanding the language of the majority of religious believers. After all, there would not have been missionaries, debates, councils, treatises on doctrines or the like unless believers of various stripes took themselves to be seriously at odds with one another. One does not seek to convert those of other faiths or draw up doctrinal statements to delineate one system of belief from another if they all say the same thing.[11]

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[11] Of course it is entirely possible that various religious believers are simply *wrong* in thinking that they disagree with one another. The philosopher of religion, John Hick, suggests something like this in his book, *An Interpretation of Religion*. For example, one can imagine two different

Turning back to the various phenomenal ways of speaking about God manifested in the world's religions and the conflict between them, one feels tempted, or at times even compelled by humility, to say something like, "they're all correct" or "who's to say?" or "that's just how they understand the world." How could one possibly maintain, without hubris, that one is better than all the rest? But of course this is what they all *do* claim. Many do this explicitly by claiming that their way is the only way to get "the good stuff," like Christianity does (cf. John 14:6, Acts 4:12). But importantly, all do this *implicitly* by making claims about reality: about the nature of human life, suffering, how to escape suffering, about the nature of deities (and whether there are any), about whether there is life after death, whether time is cyclical and so on. The idea that the truth of one religion prohibits the truth of another religion – insofar as the two differ – is called "exclusivism." I submit that there is nothing philosophically, or morally, wrong with saying that in a dispute in which two persons *contradict* each other that one person must be wrong and the other right.[12] Indeed, it is something of an analytic truth that we all *do* think this about our own beliefs. If we didn't think our beliefs were true, we wouldn't hold them; we'd hold some other belief.[13]

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religious cults growing up around the worship of the "morning star" and the "evening star" – they fight with one another, try to convert one another, and are obviously sincere in believing that they disagree with one another about the content of their beliefs; however, "behind the curtain," so to speak, the content of their faiths are ultimately (unbeknownst to the believers themselves) the same. While I admit that this is true, the analogy is misleading when applied to robust systems of religious belief. In the case of the star Venus, it is perhaps imaginable how one is using the phrase, "the same" when claiming that the two religious believers – regardless of their own beliefs – really are "the same." Calling varying deep metaphysical beliefs, such as beliefs about the nature of God, the afterlife, the linearity or non-linearity of time, "the same" requires some severe revision to the meanings of the words involved.

[12] Of course, as with all disagreements, both sides could both be wrong.

[13] As C.S. Peirce points out, to believe something simply *means* to think that the belief is true.

When confronted with disagreement of this kind there have been, historically, two options. Either one can undertake what Jürgen Habermas calls "strategic action" (i.e., one can attempt to destroy or discourage one's opponents by various forms of force or coercion) or one can enter into rational argumentation and try to convince one's opponent through reason. And, as global conflagration is palatable to no reasonable person, it is imperative that we continue to hone our ability to have meaningful and productive means of cross-cultural deliberation. These deliberations do already occur. Whenever two members of religious denominations disagree about points of theology, whenever two philosophers sit down with one another and argue out their positions, whenever a member of the religious community debates an atheist, we have forms of cross-cultural deliberation.

The goals of such encounters vary from situation to situation. But I can think of at least three potential goals that we might have. First, the goal may simply be *understanding*. This is certainly a lofty aim and, when undertaken sincerely, often a preliminary step toward any other form of cross-cultural interaction. Second, the goal of the argument might be a collaborative search for truth. Oftentimes we are not fully set in our beliefs and so we explore various beliefs or belief systems with the help of an interlocutor. And, third, if we are honest with ourselves, I think we recognize that one of the goals of these encounters is often – in religious language – "conversion." In this case the intention is to present our beliefs in such a way that our interlocutor will recognize their truth, moral rightness, or both. We want the other party, of their own rational and free volition, to come to hold a view that is closer to the one we hold.[14] Indeed, as I hope to show, each of these two latter forms of deliberation, when undertaken successfully,

[14] Often in the process of entering into the other's worldview – the intent of which is to convince them of the truth of our beliefs – we begin to see the reasonableness of their point of view; sometimes we are converted ourselves.

have the same structure – they all amount to making a case for the superiority of one system over another. I hope to articulate the mechanism – to speak in Kant's lofty terms, the "conditions of possibility" – of successful deliberation.[15]

How is it possible for a member of one religious tradition to claim that her own beliefs are superior to another community whose members are also informed and sincere? In other words, how can one make one's own beliefs appear to be the rational choice to one's interlocutor? When approached from an epistemological framework, as I approach it, the task is essentially that of producing a mechanism by which we can justify our beliefs to one another. Consequently, a helpful starting place will be to examine the two pre-eminent systems of belief justification in the philosophy of religion. The most natural starting place, I believe, is to examine an issue in contemporary epistemology raised by the so called "Reformed epistemologists" – Alvin Plantinga, William P. Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff: Can religious belief be justified without evidence?

Often philosophers who write on rationality present us with a false dichotomy: either one has an objective, contextually neutral standard for practices of justification, or one is left with relativism; either there is neutral evidence which, when articulated, can serve to adjudicate disagreements and claims to truth and philosophical superiority, or "anything goes." The basic thrust of my argument will be to demonstrate that this dichotomy – a holdover from Enlightenment thinking – is a false one. My goal is to develop a way of thinking about justification of religious beliefs that doesn't rely on "evidence," when philosophers mean by that

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[15] And just as Kant was not trying to undertake theoretical science in his first *Critique* so my task is not to provide an apologetic for any particular worldview. Rather, as I have just stipulated, I hope to clarify and develop what actually occurs when successful cross-cultural deliberation occurs.

something that is compelling to all members of a diverse conversation, or that exists "outside of" or "in common between" each extant tradition. The idea is to reach a position where one can talk about the superiority of one religious belief system over another without relying on context-neutral "evidence" or an analogous concept.[16] In so doing, I will show there is a way to give a robust account of rationality without succumbing to outright skepticism or relativism about religious beliefs.

The question of how beliefs are justified isn't simply a problem for the ivory tower. It's a problem for human beings in general. When you ask someone – anyone – why they believe "X" (that God exists, that abortion is wrong or permissible, that capitalism is unjust), they often give very different kinds of justifications for the beliefs that they have. And not only from one mode of discourse to another (i.e., mathematical beliefs, moral beliefs etc.) but from paradigm to paradigm within that mode of discourse. There are a wide range of competing forms of justification embedded within different traditions; in other words, people from differing traditions take different items as definitive justification for certain beliefs.[17] A Buddhist mystic may take a certain experience as definitive evidence for the truth of their beliefs. A naturalist would dismiss such a claim out of hand. A Spinozist Jew might only take rational proof as justification for particular religious beliefs. A Neo-Orthodox Christian would be astounded by the *hubris* in presuming that the human intellect would have access to the divine nature and claim any such rational deduction flawed or at least inadmissible. Again, to justify their beliefs,

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[16] At least in principle. I have no desire in this project to give any kind of positive apologetic for any particular faith community *per se*, but rather to talk about the conditions of the possibility of rational deliberation.

[17] I am not here making the claim that within each tradition there is a uniform way of establishing justification. There are at least as many forms of justification as there are traditions, and "tradition" is certainly not even equivalent to "religion."

some people will say things like "I believe that God exists because the Bible says so." Or, "How can you not believe in God, go look up at the stars!" Or, "I've heard reports of miracles that only a deity could have performed." Now these answers are by no means convincing to anyone who doesn't already hold relevant beliefs, such as the beliefs that the Bible is authoritative, or that God is the type of being who is concerned with beauty, or that God could intervene or suspend the laws of nature. A philosophical materialist, for example, won't think the above responses are any good. Conversely, an atheist might say, "I'm an atheist *because* the theory of evolution precludes the existence of a benevolent God." Of course, this isn't convincing to a creationist who doesn't believe in evolution for the very same reason. Nor is the dichotomy between evolution and creationism convincing to many philosophers because they often don't think these two positions are logically exhaustive or, even, if properly defined, logically exclusive.

Hence, we can say that, descriptively speaking, different people, and diverse communities, think that different things count as definitive justification, as good reasons to hold a belief.[18] What counts as good *evidence* for a belief will differ from community to community and there seems to be no plausible objective arbiter between conversants. This plurality of beliefs and forms of justification often motivates the skeptical conviction that we really can't know anything about important religious questions anyway. This is a problem because it leads people to say things like, "Different things are true for different people or different communities. Who's to say? Everyone has their own ideas about what is true and that's all there is to it." (Any instructor who has dealt with undergraduates is likely to have come across this relativistic view.) What are we to do about this everyday problem?

[18] Important to note, and a point I will come back to, is that what constitutes a good justification of a belief depends in large part on the background beliefs that one holds – i.e., the status of the Bible etc.

A productive way of thinking about this project is to think about how *evidentialists* – those who believe in a universal standard of evidence – propose to avoid the "anything goes" side of the cultural divide. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, characterizes *evidentialism* as the belief that "it's obligatory on all who hold religious beliefs that those be rationally grounded in the deliverances of reason and experience."[19] Evidentialism counters epistemic relativism by putting constraints on justification. The idea is that we can avoid the pitfall of relativism only if we have can limit what counts as justification and what does not. Evidentialists think, quite naturally, that evidence plays the role of justifying beliefs. As the Reformed epistemologists are fond of pointing out, this usually takes the form of a kind of foundationalist criterion of justification. A belief is seen as justified if it is itself *properly basic* – that is, justified in itself without recourse to other, more fundamental beliefs, or if it's related in the right way to properly basic beliefs. The evidentialist's goal is to prevent skepticism by showing that certain beliefs *are* justified while simultaneously putting constraints on what counts as acceptable forms justification in order to avoid relativism. And if too large a set of beliefs is allowed to be considered basic, this leads to the danger of the pluralization of reason, that is, people would be entitled to hold whatever beliefs they'd like.

Hence, evidentialism essentially provides two epistemological services. First, it is a theory of *justification*; it is meant to show that skepticism – the idea that we can never be justified in our beliefs – is false. It does this by wedding itself to a kind of *foundationalism*. As foundationalists, evidentialists typically believe that if beliefs are not grounded in something absolutely certain, no beliefs would be justified. Thus, there must be some beliefs which are necessarily primary, that are self-evident such that we are justified in holding without any

[19] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Religious Epistemology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 253.

subsidiary or external justification. The idea is that the rest of our beliefs will also be justified if they are related in appropriate ways to these basic beliefs. Second, it provides a bulwark against forms of *relativism*. Evidentialism is a *normative* theory of justification. That is, it gives rules or standards for what types of reasons we ought to have if our beliefs are to be rational. As I noted, it does this by constraining the kinds of reasons that are admissible for belief justification. In this way, evidentialism provides a criterion to distinguish good justifications of beliefs from bad justifications for beliefs. If any old kind of justification were satisfactory, this would undermine the normative impetus of practices of justification and lead to relativism. There is nothing, epistemically speaking, to praise or critique if anything is justified. For instance, it is not acceptable for me to claim that my belief in God is legitimate simply because I was raised in a Christian household. This is not a good reason because my biographical details do not amount to evidence for the truth of theism. For the evidentialist, of course, the proper standard for justification is the presence of evidence, whether experiential or rationalistic. One is justified in holding a belief if that belief accords with the evidence that the person has.

A strong criticism of evidentialism comes from the "Reformed epistemologists," a group of philosophers inspired Protestant Reformers like John Calvin, who argue, utilizing the schema of foundationalism, that belief in God can be construed as properly basic.[20] That is, belief in God need not be established on the basis of other more foundational beliefs but is immediately acceptable just as the belief "I see a tree" or "I have a headache" is acceptable without any reliance on other, external beliefs. The idea is that if a person comes by a belief in an epistemically nonculpable way, and isn't aware of any defeaters to that belief, then that person is

[20] Strictly speaking, however, we shouldn't say that the proposition 'God exists' is basic, but rather propositions like 'God created all this'. Of course, statements like the latter entail the former. See Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Noûs*, vol. 15, no. 1. (Mar., 1981): 47.

justified in continuing to hold that belief. In Reformed epistemology one is only to be held responsible to the criteria of justification set up by those in one's own community.[21] So, for instance, if you're raised in a Christian household, you are entirely within your epistemic rights to continue to be a Christian so long as you're not aware (nonculpably not aware) of any defeaters to Christianity.

How would each of these systems deal with the question, "How can we account for successful rational deliberation between religious believers of various stripes?" Evidentialism provides a convenient way of commensurating different cultural practices of justification of religious beliefs. As I stated above, the evidentialist's method begins with constraints that they place on justification – evidence is to function as the normative standard for forms of justification. Part and parcel of this scheme is limiting the *kinds* of evidence that are permitted. The idea is that by limiting what can legitimately count as a good reason to hold a belief to evidence of limited kinds, the two parties will inevitably have some grounds for comparison. As a normative standard, it is meant to apply universally – to all religious believers. Evidence is taken to be the only neutral, publically available and compelling reason for belief. Having evidence as a standard is ostensibly impartial – it favors no participants unduly in a diverse conversation. It is, at least allegedly, *community transcendent and objective*. Evidence is taken to not be in any way contingent upon the idiosyncrasies of individual cultures. The benefit of evidentialism is that one can (at least in principle) compare beliefs and belief systems based on how well supported they are by the evidence. If there is a disagreement between two people, the position that has the better justification (i.e., the better evidence) is superior. In this way, evidence can serve as the basis for criticizing or praising beliefs or believers. Using evidential

[21] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 50.

support as a litmus test, we can adjudicate disagreements and something that can show one position to be better than another.

While evidentialism requires that we should be able to justify belief in God through neutral reason or commonly accepted evidence (i.e., something like natural theology), the Reformed epistemologists reject the need for evidence to back up properly basic beliefs. According to influential critiques, such as Plantinga's (analyzed in Chapter 1), evidentialism turns out to be inconsistent because it purports to function in a neutral realm which is devoid of non-universal premises. Indeed, these thinkers have convincingly maintained that evidentialism, insofar as it relies on a kind of classical foundationalism, is "self-referentially incoherent" and so should be rejected.[22] Plantinga convincingly argues that the evidentialist's criterion for justified belief – i.e., that the belief be self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses or derived appropriately from such beliefs – fails its own litmus test. The criterion itself is neither self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses, and it is by no means clear how it could be derived from these sources of justification. Hence the evidentialist's normative demand on religious belief is self-referentially inconsistent. Indeed, under the critique of the Reformed epistemologists, rather than providing an objective and neutral standard which can adjudicate disagreements between different cultures, evidentialism appears just another tradition itself, and one which seeks to impose its idiosyncratic rules of justification on a multifaceted debate.

For the Reformed epistemologists, on the other hand, provided that a belief meets the canons of justification of the relevant belief community of which one is a part, a belief is seen as *prima facie* justified. Such a stipulation prevents the use of alien codes of rationality upon members of another tradition and culture. By making justification relative to the community, the

[22] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 44.

Reformed epistemologists present a position of defensive impregnability – it successfully puts those who would like to call religious belief irrational in a very difficult position. But there are costs as well. The result of relativizing justification to the belief community of which one is already a part, there is little to no impetus for one to ever change one's beliefs in response to religious pluralism or cross-cultural dialogue. In fact, the Reformed epistemologists' position seems to entail that warranted basic belief in God is limited only to those who have the capacity to intuit God's existence. If one is predisposed to discerning experiential evidence of God, then one is justified, under certain conditions, to hold belief in God as properly basic (i.e. without any further, external justification). But, by parity, if one is not predisposed to discerning evidence in God, then under certain circumstances, one is justified in rejecting any appeal to belief in God as properly basic. By relativizing justification to the beliefs of a community, it leaves the believer with no resources to convince other people to hold those beliefs themselves and therefore no means of explicating how successful cross-cultural deliberation might take place. One might note that proselytizing doesn't even make sense unless one has good reason to think that one's position is better than another's. But arguing to parity undermines the possibility of arguing for the *superiority* of one's beliefs by taking away the normative resources necessary to make such a claim. Indeed, with no transcendent basis for appeal between parties that disagree with one another, we might say that each person is entitled to "sit tight" with their own beliefs.

A major difficulty in developing a mechanism for cross-cultural deliberation is the inability to use empirical evidence to settle these disputes as to which culture has a better claim to truth. The attractiveness of using empirical evidence as the ground of truth claims should be obvious: it is an easily available and natural repository of evidence which can serve as support for the truth of various claims. This is modeled quite readily in the sciences. When two parties

of scientists disagree with one another, they appeal to experiments and empirical data as a means of settling their disputes.[23] However, as is well known in the philosophy of science, experience is underdetermined – it stands in need of interpretation. Or, as some have put it, the world is not "self-announcing." That is, empirical information does not interpret itself. The standard criticism is that, given any set of data points, an indefinite number of possible theories can be created which accommodate them. The empirical data itself simply cannot provide its own interpretation and therefore cannot settle which of these indefinite theoretical systems is the correct one. To put it another way, when theoretical constructs are themselves in question, sense data and experience cannot be brought in as evidential support for a theory except in a question begging way.[24]

Interestingly, the use of religious experience as a ground of justification for religious beliefs has come back into vogue as a result of William Alston's seminal work *Perceiving God*. Unfortunately, in my opinion, this project is doomed to failure. The difficulty just noted, that the world is not self-announcing, while very often in practice a merely academic problem for scientists, in the field of religious justification entirely undermines experience as a source of epistemic justification. The way that the world appears to perceivers hinges on several things, not least of which are the beliefs that we bring with us to our experiences. The way that a religious experience strikes one depends upon the lifeworld of the perceiver – on her upbringing, beliefs, etc. This is to say that we cannot epistemologically ground our religious beliefs in

[23] The complexities of this process are enormous and I do not have time to enter into them here, but I am only interested here in the intuitive point that empirical evidence can function as a means for resolving disputes about truth claims.

[24] My point is not that experience can never justify beliefs in any context. It's simply that experience cannot count as a justification of a belief to someone who has a different belief system, because one's beliefs in part constitute the experience itself. Again, such a justification would be flagrantly circular.

experience; rather, religious experience – in an important sense to be discussed in Chapter 1 – *presupposes* a theology.

Essentially, the Reformed epistemologists state that, regardless of whether we know it or not, some people just are in a better situation to perceive what is true and what is not. After all, could it not be the case that this really is how things are? There is no *a priori* reason why access to truth should be egalitarian – why should we not find that certain people are better equipped to ascertain the truth? And, if the Reformed epistemologists are right about the nature of our cognitive faculties, if there is indeed a faculty which, when functioning properly, produces knowledge of the divine, then it is indeed likely that some people (i.e., those who have that apparatus functioning properly) will be in a better position to ascertain religious truth. It certainly is possible that there is a cognitive faculty that perceives the divine. But it is well known in epistemology that the question of reliability of faculties and the justification of the belief that we have reliable faculties are two separate questions. Hence, the relevant question as regards cross-cultural disputes will be, "Do we have any good reason to think that the Reformed epistemologists' story about our cognitive faculties is right?" If Reformed Christian theology is true, then it is likely that there is such a faculty which, when functioning properly perceives the divine. If there were such a faculty, then we would have reason to think that one system (that of a certain strand of Christianity) is superior to the alternatives. But, again, what *reason* do we have to think that it *is* true? It is clear, then, that what stands in need of justification is more than just a simply, isolated belief, but the whole theoretical and theological account that Reformed epistemology gives us. And if this is the case, then we are right back where we started. Experience, then, simply cannot serve as the arbiter of cross-cultural religious disputes, because

the justification of the use of various interpretations of experience or the faculties that produce them is precisely what is in question.[25]

Experience, and ultimately sensation, may be a partial root of some of our beliefs, but it cannot itself show one system to be superior to another and it cannot account for successful cross-cultural deliberation. And certainly experience cannot itself provide the justification that our faculties are themselves reliable. Cross-cultural deliberation is grounded in practices of rational justification. And as beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs, so must our arguments to one another be grounded in beliefs; in this case, beliefs which are recognized as functionally foundational in the conversation.[26] One cannot reason with another unless there are points of commonality on which one can build a case. Consequently, any deliberative cross-cultural argument is contingent upon – or when it is successful, presupposes – a preponderance of epistemic agreement: agreement about what constitutes a good reason to hold a belief in a relevant mode of discourse (Chapter 2), similarity of beliefs about reality (Chapter 3), agreement upon the issue of the debate itself (Chapter 4) and agreement upon what counts as a belief system being better than another (Chapter 5).

In developing a mechanism for cross-cultural deliberation I depart from traditional accounts of rationality. I believe this is necessary in order to countenance a plurality of competing historically and culturally constituted rationalities while maintaining the centrality of

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[25] It is important to realize that sometimes religious experience *can* serve as a means for justifying beliefs in conversations. For example, two religious believers might very well accept personal experience as a justification for a certain doctrinal position. *But*, it is essential to realize that when this happens, there must *already* be a preponderance of agreement on the status of religious experience. The validity of the use of evidence is contingent upon agreement *about* the kinds of evidence which are considered relevant.

[26] Indeed, once the relevant beliefs are in place, experience could play a role in deliberation.

reason in rational belief and deliberation. I hope to develop a middle path between evidentialism and Reformed epistemology, taking their strengths and eliding their weaknesses. Evidentialism – and the Enlightenment broadly – held that a belief is rational insofar as it is justified by neutral evidence. This is an abstract, objectivist criterion. I begin with the observation that, descriptively, there is no piece of evidence that is universally accepted in religious debates. The Enlightenment notion that Reason uniquely determines what people ought to think is an utterly unhelpful idea when philosophers cannot determine what the criterion is for discovering what Reason *does* determine. And so I cede the point to would be relativists that there may be a plurality of rationalities, but I will show that it does not follow from this that no religious or philosophical beliefs are better or worse than others. I disagree even with the evidentialist claim that there *ought* to be one. I think we need a new way of looking at rational belief which is situated, contextualized. I believe a situated account of rationality can also give us a way of comparing worldviews, talking about rational conversion, superiority and the like without bothering about whether people *ought* to take such and such as evidence. What people *ought* to believe is relative to what they already believe and know. They can't have epistemic obligations to systems they reasonably reject. The natural concern about this type of approach is that if the reasons are justified within a community of that particular religious system, then justification will be viciously circular. But what is the alternative? With regard to what would we have our beliefs be justified? It is simply a mistake to think that there is a form of justification that is entirely independent of beliefs and practices which are themselves partially constitutive of our cultures and traditions. We should not keep looking for a transcendent standard which is authoritative and inviolable, it's just not there.

I hope to countenance the descriptive fact that communities have different ideas of what constitutes justification for their beliefs while not falling into epistemic relativism – the idea that almost any belief is potentially *prima facie* justified and so, consequently, "anything goes." That is, I wish to develop a way of thinking about how there can be a plurality of rationalities, or processes of justification, while preserving a strong notion of rationality – but one which is different than the Enlightenment notion that rationality is tied to objective evidence. Consequently, I argue that cultural beliefs cannot be evaluated "objectively" or with reference to neutral or culturally independent "evidence" but only contextually, with reference to the concrete beliefs of individuals. However, as individuals from one culture and belief system are able (in principle) to enter in to other belief systems, they can compare them with their own and recognize one or the other to be superior. Hence rationality is understood without the transcendent standard of justification which the evidentialists claim is necessary to stave off skepticism and relativism. My suggestion is that reasons for belief, while grounded in one particular community, are open to the scrutiny and challenges of other communities because each can (in principle) understand the others. If I am right, then this would undermine the single most pervasive arguments for skepticism and relativism – that because each has its own standards of justification, any one is as good as any other.

1. A Tale of Two Theories

When someone asks you, "why do you believe X?" sometimes the inquirer is asking for a biographical account of how you came to hold the belief. But more likely, they are asking you for a kind of defense. That is, they are asking why it is you believe, or think it is reasonable to believe what you do; perhaps why it's more reasonable to hold that belief rather than other relevant alternatives – that is, the person is asking for a *justification*. In asking such a question, the inquirer is taking for granted that you do, or ought to have, reasons for your beliefs. The inquirer is also assuming that you have some amount of control over what you believe. If you simply had no choice at all in what beliefs you hold, then the question would be meaningless. For example, if all your beliefs were strictly causally determined, there would be no sense in asking why you hold one belief rather than another in the sense of giving a justification. Indeed, any account that you could meaningfully give would be reducible to an explanation of how, causally, you came to hold the belief that you do. Hence, in answering the inquirer's question, "why do you believe X?" you are implicitly giving reasons to think that it is reasonable to hold the belief that you do, even knowing that there are alternatives. It stands to reason that theories of justification will provide a helpful way into the question of how people can argue that worldviews are better than their alternatives.

In contemporary philosophy of religion, there are, currently, two preeminent theories of justification: evidentialism and Reformed epistemology. It might be better to say that they are two camps, or groups of philosophers who hold like-minded theories rather than theories in themselves. When I use the terms 'evidentialism' and 'Reformed epistemology' I am using them as "compression" terms – squeezing together under one heading various articulations that have a close family resemblance, but which still have their distinctive individual differences. I do this simply because I am interested in critically examining the general approaches to epistemology represented by these two camps and do not have the time to articulate and analyze each particular logical variation. As a working definition of evidentialism, I employ Nicholas Wolterstorff's characterization: *evidentialism* is the belief that it's "obligatory on all who hold religious beliefs that those be rationally grounded in the deliverances of reason and experience."[27] As the name implies, the "deliverances of reason and experience" take the form of evidence.

Importantly, evidentialism is a *deontological* account of justification. It is a theory about one's duties or obligations in rationally holding, or continuing to hold various kinds of beliefs. As the name implies, deontological theories create norms for the creation and retention of beliefs. Beliefs are understood, in a sense, as a subset of the totality of all of our actions. Beliefs can be justified or unjustified depending on the conditions under which they are formed or maintained. So, how does one meet these epistemic obligations so as to remain epistemically justified? As one might imagine, the concern with epistemic duties is not necessarily prudential or pragmatic; that is, justification is not conferred on those who simply believe *p* because it is useful or helpful to believe *p* or that it makes the holder of the belief feel good. Deontological theories of justification maintain that one has a duty to ascertain *truth*. It is also required that

[27] Wolterstorff, "Religious Epistemology," 253.

these reasons are known by the believer, they cannot simply be around in the philosophical or epistemic neighborhood, the believer has to be aware of these reasons to be justified by them. We can say then, that one is justified in holding a belief if one has good reason to think that that belief is true, and in addition to this, that one holds that belief on the basis of those good reasons. And, naturally, for evidentialists, the reasons that count as justification for belief take the form of evidence. The question of whether or not a belief is supported by evidence is usually, in its Enlightenment developments, has an *objective* and *universal* answer. Reason dictates what it is reasonable for people to believe; that is, whether or not something constitutes evidence for a belief is not contingent upon what people happen think about it – the evidential relation is objective. The use of reason is not contextual; reason points where it does regardless of peoples' opinions about it, and regardless of what people think and believe. It is also *universal* in the deontic sense that, in order to function as a criterion of justified belief, it has to apply equally to everyone. In other words, evidentialism doesn't meet its goal of providing a deontological criterion for justified belief if it admits of too wide a range of things to count as evidence. If whatever one religious group says is evidence therefore counts as evidence, then it does not provide grounds for praising and blaming particular beliefs and consequently, cannot help adjudicate cross-cultural disagreements. But this feature of evidentialism is also what allows evidentialists to criticize belief systems they disagree with. If their opponents do not have sufficient objective evidence – whether arguments or empirical data, something that is objective – then their beliefs are not justified.

In just this way, some evidentialists have used their theory of justification to argue that religious belief is epistemically deficient. The charge is that religious belief it is not well grounded in the evidence; that irreligious alternatives are better justified, and that therefore, a

reasonable person would be irreligious. This is sometimes called, following Anthony Flew, the "presumption of atheism." Any person who persists in holding religious beliefs without forthcoming evidence is being unreasonable. While it's difficult to give a corresponding succinct articulation of Reformed epistemology, perhaps a starting point is that Reformed epistemology rest on a denial, first and foremost, of evidentialism. The fundamental idea is that religious believers do not necessarily need evidence in order to be reasonable in continuing to hold some religious beliefs. It is necessary only that beliefs be formed in an appropriate way and that they not be defeated by known evidence. It is also noteworthy that not all of the Reformed epistemologists are concerned with justification as a constitutive element of knowledge. Rather, they typically talk about what one is within one's epistemic rights in believing—about what one is *entitled* to believe. So a person who is justified in holding a belief is entitled to hold that belief, if they are within their epistemic rights to hold that belief or are not flouting any epistemic duties by holding that belief. As one might expect, justification takes on a very defensive tone with the Reformed epistemologists.

It seems to me that the system that has gripped the modern mind as the most intuitive and obvious way to justify one's beliefs is evidentialism.[28] Evidentialism is taken to have roots in Descartes' thought, and reached its first full expression with John Locke. I think it would be helpful to briefly examine two passages that I believe are foundational for the evidentialist enterprise. Both of these passages exemplify the deontological aspect of evidentialism, one of the theory's essential characteristics. Descartes writes in the *Meditations*:

[28] On the other hand, it is unclear whether its intuitiveness was the *cause* of evidentialism's success or simply the *consequence* of its permeating the Western mind due to the pervasiveness of Early Modern philosophy.

> But if I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error. But if instead I were to make an assertion or a denial, then I am not using my freedom properly. Were I to select the alternative that is false, then obviously I will be in error. But were I to embrace the other alternative, it will be by sheer luck that I happen upon the truth; but I will still not be without fault, for it is manifest by the light of nature that a perception on the part of the intellect must always precede a determination on the part of the will.[29]

Here Descartes clearly states that the will must follow the direction of the intellect. To believe, i.e., to use the will to actively assent to an idea beyond the scope of what the intellect has properly judged, is to rely on luck. Any use of the will in this way is a culpable violation of the proper use of one's freedom. Rather, the will's proper office is to give assent only to those beliefs which reason has shown to be sound.

The progression from Descartes to Locke is important, but is outside of the scope of this project. However, it should be noted that many scholars hold that Descartes was not in the passage above setting out criteria for justified belief in general, but was rather concerned with the Aristotelian project of delineating *scientia* proper from other forms of belief. In any case, it is clear that in the following passage from Locke that setting forth criteria for justified belief in general was his explicit intent. As Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, "In effect, what Locke did was take the classical foundationalist demands that Descartes had laid down for scientific belief and lay them down for rational belief in general."[30] Locke writes,

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[29] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1979), 38.

[30] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 7.

> [F]aith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposite to it. He that believes, without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due his maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of mistake and error. He that does not this to the best of his power, however he sometimes lights on truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be accountable for whatever mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the light and faculties God has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover truth, by those helps and abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature, that though he should miss truth, he will not miss the reward of it. For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clearer evidence, and greater probability.[31]

Just as in the passage from Descartes, there is a preponderance of deontological language. The reader cannot help noticing the obligatory terms *duty* and *ought* throughout both passages. It is a duty of a rational creature, Locke says, to sincerely seek truth. This is a classic example of evidentialism's deontological platform. Locke here introduces the idea that one's duty to seek the truth is fulfilled by believing only on the basis of evidence. Someone who holds a belief in the face of a lack of evidence is seen as flouting their epistemic duty to ascertain the truth. This conviction was later crystallized in W. K. Clifford's famous claim that "It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[32] The evidentialist holds, essentially, that it is irrational or unjustifiable to hold a belief for which there is not sufficient evidence. Insofar as evidentialism is a normative concern, evidentialists turn

[31] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2004), Book IV, Chapter XVII.24, 589–590.

[32] W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.

evidence into a canon for the rationality or irrationality of belief. A person's beliefs are good and rational if they are based on sufficient reason and bad or irrational if they are not based on sufficient reason.[33]

Justification, for the evidentialist, is not about emotions or biographical history: it is about the appropriate use of reason. Faith, for instance, does not serve to justify one's beliefs, regardless of how firm one's conviction is in the truth of a given belief. Some have taken this to mean that evidentialism and religious belief are necessarily at odds with one another, but this is not so. John Locke himself was an avowed theist. However, the evidentialist does maintain that in order for one to hold religious beliefs, one ought to do so only because one has *evidence* for the truth of that belief. A confessing Christian might be an evidentialist, but she is a Christian because she believes that she has evidence for its truth. When evidentialism is applied to religious beliefs, it often implicitly takes the form of answering Tertullian's famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The evidentialist thinks that Athens has everything to do with Jerusalem, or better, that the right road to Jerusalem passes through Athens. Again,

[33] For a belief to be justified, then, one ought to have evidence for the truth of that belief and, further, one must believe on that basis. Hence, within evidentialism, justification means that beliefs can be justified only by what is accessible to one's consciousness. One can only *have* evidence if one is aware of it. If this is the case, then justification is primarily a relation between a person and their beliefs, not between beliefs and other beliefs. Further, it is often adjoined to evidentialism that one ought to tailor the strength of one's beliefs in proportion to the strength of one's evidence. The idea is that the more evidence or the better quality of evidence one has for a belief, the more likely that belief is to be true. And after all, this is what one has an obligation to pursue – truth. Hence, it is not just that one is obligated to have evidence for one's beliefs, but one is required to have *sufficient* evidence for one's beliefs. The more likely the belief is to be true, the greater the entitlement to hold the belief. If one's evidence for a belief is weak, one ought to hold it lightly, the lack of commitment reflecting the lack of certainty in the belief's truth and the readiness to drop it should the preponderance of evidence turn against it. As the weight of evidence builds in favor of a belief, the stronger one is permitted to hold the belief.

being an evidentialist doesn't preempt religious belief, but it does make the rationality of religious belief contingent upon the evidence that one has for its truth.[34]

What will concern us here is when evidentialism is used as an objection to religious belief. I am concerned with this objection because it is an explicit use of a theory (evidentialism) purporting to demonstrate the superiority of one worldview (typically, naturalism or non-theism at least) over another (theism). The way that it does this is not to show that theism is false, but to attack the rationality of the people who hold the belief. Using Alvin Plantinga's terminology, we can say that evidentialism is a *de jure* objection to belief in God. What he means by this is that evidentialism is an objection to the rationality or justification of religious belief, not to the belief's truth *per se*. Plantinga gives what he takes to be a typical articulation of this kind of objection: "Well, I don't know whether Christian belief is *true* (after all, who could know a thing like that?), but I do know that it is irrational (or intellectually unjustified or unreasonable or intellectually questionable)."[35] The evidentialist, then, when objecting to the rationality of religious belief is suggesting that there is insufficient evidence for belief. Plantinga responds by undermining the purported necessity of having evidence in order to be justified in holding a belief. In other words, he attacks the notion that the presence of evidence is a necessary criterion for seeing one system as being better or worse than another. If he is right, then we will need a standard other than the traditional formulation of evidentialism to compare worldviews.

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[34] I think the evidentialist's conviction is in principle a good and healthy one. The demand that a believer give positive reasons for their belief prevents an attitude that "anything goes"; i.e., that beliefs are justified simply by virtue of their being held by one, or because these are the beliefs that one was raised with. It reminds us that justification is about what one can offer as reasons for one's beliefs, it's not about emotional states or person history or any other kind of biographical account of how you came to hold the belief. Evidence then serves, in turn, as the grounds for assessing – i.e. praising of critiquing – one's own beliefs or the beliefs of others. And of course this is directly relevant to the project at hand.

[35] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xii.

1.1. Plantinga's Critique of Evidentialism

To understand Plantinga's critique of evidentialism, it is essential to understand why he believes evidentialism to be inextricably linked to foundationalism. But first, it might be helpful to say a bit about what is meant by the term 'foundationalism.' It is, as Plantinga puts it, "an enormously popular picture or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality and allied topics."[36] When applied to the rationality of belief, foundationalism, like evidentialism, is largely a deontological or normative concern; it is a view about how our beliefs *ought* to be structured if we are to achieve rational belief. The foundationalist maintains that humans have epistemic norms or obligations, analogous to those we have with regard to our actions. To be rational is not only to hold beliefs that are true, but to violate none of these epistemic obligations.

Perhaps the most illuminating way of talking about foundationalism is to talk about noetic structure. As Plantinga puts it, "A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he

[36] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 41.

believes, together with certain epistemic relations among him and these propositions."[37] For a foundationalist, to give an account of one's noetic structure is in part laying out the relations between various beliefs. Some beliefs that a person has may be based or grounded upon other beliefs. This relationship of "basing" or "grounding" is essential to foundationalists. Indeed, we may think of the classical foundationalist "as beginning with the observation that some of one's beliefs may be *based upon* others; it may be that there are a pair of propositions *A* and *B* such that I believe *A on the basis of B*."[38] Foundationalists are distinctive in that they believe there is a proper order to one's noetic structure. While a coherentist might think it proper to hold a group of beliefs (usually of sufficiently large size), such that each belief is based upon the others, the foundationalist believes this to be improper under any conditions.

In order to have a proper noetic structure, that is, in order to not violate any of one's epistemic norms, is in part to have a foundation for one's beliefs. In any rational noetic structure, some beliefs will not be held on the basis of others. Those beliefs that are not held on the basis of other beliefs are called "basic."[39] "Nonbasic" beliefs are those beliefs that are held on the basis of other beliefs. These beliefs in turn may be held on the basis of other beliefs. But eventually, in order to be properly structured, nonbasic beliefs must eventually find grounding in beliefs that are themselves basic, or foundational. Intrinsic to the foundationalist picture of a proper noetic structure is this distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs. It is essential to be

[37] Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 48.

[38] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 41.

[39] Cf. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 46.

clear about the distinction that Plantinga is trying to make here. Perhaps some examples are in order:[40]

(1) $2 + 3 = 5$

(2) I ate breakfast this morning

(3) I seem to see a tree

(1) and (2) seem obviously self-evident, one to reason, the other to self-reflection. (3) raises an interesting issue for Plantinga. Someone might object that beliefs like (3) are not basic strictly speaking; it might be based on the proposition "it seems to me that I see a tree." Plantinga asserts that ordinarily beliefs like (3) are basic, and are not based on propositions *about* one's experience. In this sense they are immediate. This is not to deny that is possible to step back from the flow of one's experience and make assertions about that experience and form beliefs on the basis of those propositions. However, it does seem to be the case that ordinarily when we form beliefs about how the world appears to us, we are in fact preoccupied with attending to the things in the world immediately and not taking up a reflective stance.

Nonbasic beliefs are beliefs that are based upon other beliefs that one holds. Some nonbasic beliefs might be:

(4) $1377 \div 81 = 17$

(5) Ashgabat is the capital of Turkmenistan

(6) 'epistemology' is spelled 'e'-'p'-'i'-'s'-'t'-'e'-'m'-'o'-'l'-'o'-'g'-'y'

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[40] The following numbered examples are simply variations of those given by Plantinga in "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*.

These kinds of beliefs are based on others, like beliefs about how to calculate quotients or the multiplication table, or beliefs about the veracity of my almanac. As Plantinga suggests, in the last case, my belief about how to spell 'epistemology' might be based on how I believe it is spelled in the dictionary. (5) and (6) call attention to two other features of the relationship between basic and nonbasic beliefs. Sometimes basic and nonbasic beliefs are interchangeable. For most philosophers the spelling of 'epistemology' has become a basic belief, it is no longer based on the belief that this is how the dictionary spells it, although it is likely that at some point it was based on how an authority spelled it. Correspondingly, we should note that some beliefs are basic for some people that are not basic for others. The spelling of 'epistemology' is probably basic for all philosophers, but not many undergraduates.

All nonbasic beliefs are supported, somewhere further down the noetic structure, by basic beliefs. For any given belief, its supporting structure, or chain on justification, will terminate in these foundational, basic beliefs. Plantinga also tells us that it is important also for the foundationalist that the basing relation is asymmetric and irreflexive. This is just to say that the basic relation follows a proper order. If a belief A is based on belief B, then belief B must not be based on belief A. Or better, if any belief A is based on B, then belief B must be *logically* prior to belief A. This does not mean necessarily that B was held *temporally* before A. It is possible that one first held belief A and based it on another belief C before one had ever heard of belief B. However, if a belief is held on the basis of another belief, the grounding belief must be logically or *epistemologically* prior to the supported belief. So if I believe A on the basis of B, B must be prior. Another way of putting this, keeping in mind the structural metaphor of the foundationalist, is that the grounding belief must be on a "lower level" than the belief it supports. And again, in any rational noetic structure, this basing or supporting relation will carry on until it

terminates in the foundation. Belief A may be held on the basis of beliefs B and C, and these on the basis of other beliefs. But eventually this whole chain of support will end by a relationship with the foundational, basic beliefs.

Note that it is often difficult to tell when a belief is believed on the basis of another belief and when it is not. Part of the reason this is so difficult is that a person's self-report about *why* they hold a belief may not actually mirror their noetic structure. That is, if I ask someone why they believe 2 + 2 = 4, they might respond that this is what they were taught. Plantinga points out, and I think he is right, that while someone might cite an experiential proposition as a reason for believing 2 + 2 = 4, this does not show that this is based on this experiential proposition in one's noetic structure. Though it is difficult to say more, Plantinga suggests that it is "[a] *necessary* condition for *S*'s believing *A* on the basis of *B* is *S*'s believing both *A* and *B*, and a *sufficient* condition is *S*'s believing *A*, believing *B*, believing that *B* is good evidence for *A*, and believing that he believes *A* on the basis of *B*."[41] But it is important to keep in mind that what one cites as motivation for holding a belief may not give an accurate image of the person's noetic structure.

What, then, is Plantinga's defense against the evidentialist objection to religious belief? Why all the concern with the historical development of the evidentialist position? Plantinga's attack on evidentialism, as we will see, is quite ingenious. It allows him to do away with the evidentialist objector while simultaneously placing the religious believer in a position of defensive impregnability. What is unique about Plantinga and the other Reformed Epistemologists is that they are not at all concerned to play the evidentialist game. Instead of

[41] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 52.

countering the objection with strong evidence that one is justified in being a theist, Plantinga attacks the presuppositions that ground the objection.

I think he opts for this strategy because playing the evidentialist game is to make faith contingent upon the results of rational inquiry. To do so is to put the believer in a vulnerable position epistemologically as well as, from the perspective of some strains of Protestantism, a suspicious position theologically as well, by grounding belief in reason. Notice, however, that Plantinga does not think that there are no good reasons to believe in Christianity (he notes several – the ontological argument, probabilistic arguments like those of C.S. Lewis and Swinburne, moral arguments, and arguments about warranted belief), his reasons for rejecting such approaches lie in the fact that they make the justification of faith contingent upon reason. I think about it this way: many people base (or at least claim to base) their faith on scientific evidence for a creator. The weakness of this position is that as science's explanatory power grows, the role God plays shrinks. Some have labeled positions such as these that invoke God to fill in gaps in our explanatory systems the "God of the gaps." This seems to be an appropriate name and such arguments possess a great amount of rhetorical force when arguing for the existence of God. But the problem with invoking the presence of God whenever there is a gap in our knowledge is that if the gaps are closed, the need for God disappears. I think Plantinga's concern is a similar one. Again, it's not that he thinks there are *no* good reasons for belief, but if those reasons are shown to be faulty, what then? Would the believer forced, on pain of irrationality, to give up her beliefs? Plantinga thinks not. His strategy is to ask, "Why can't belief in God be basic?" Why can't the believer be within her epistemic rights in believing in God *without* any auxiliary evidence?

Since Plantinga and the evidentialist agree on the form that a noetic structure should take – that is, they agree that there is a proper order to beliefs and that those beliefs which are not in the base ought to be grounded in beliefs that are – the evidentialist objection to religious belief is predicated on belief in God *not* being admitted as basic. In arguing that belief in God ought to be permitted as a basic belief Plantinga is effectively wresting the sword from the evidentialist's hand. Evidentialist objectors to religious belief recoil at the idea of admitting belief in God as basic. The admission of theologically laden ideas as basic undermines, in their minds, the all-important distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs. Again, evidentialists believe that if too many beliefs are admitted as basic, then evidentialism loses its regulatory function as regards rational belief, and therefore its power to praise or criticize others' beliefs. It would also, for our purposes, lose its function in adjudicating cross-cultural deliberation. Consequently, evidentialism is in need of a criterion of proper basicality in order to distinguish their rational beliefs from the religious believer's irrational beliefs. They do this by distinguishing between those beliefs that *ought* to be part of the base of a noetic structure and those beliefs that ought not. To use Plantinga's language, they need to distinguish between beliefs that are *properly* basic and those that are not: "Here we have a further characteristic of foundationalism: the claim that not just any proposition is properly basic."[42] Based on its historical pedigree, Plantinga labels the evidentialist's criterion of proper basicality, "classical foundationalism" and formulates it as follows:

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[42] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 59. Plantinga goes on to note that this is a historical generalization and therefore "perilous," but is nonetheless illuminating enough to employ.

(CF) A proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or incorrigible for *S* or evident to the senses for *S*.[43]

There are other conceptual reasons that motivated the evidentialists' appeal to foundationalism beyond its deontological roots already discussed. In particular, foundationalism is often thought of as necessary to epistemology in order to prevent skeptical regresses of justification. In the following chapter I will discuss why I believe it is not necessary to appeal to foundationalism to avoid skeptical regresses of justification. But for the present, it is enough to note that accepting the principle that one ought not hold a belief unless it is based on evidence *will* lead to a regress of justification. What is a regress of justification? Well, it is usually thought that beliefs can only be based or grounded in other beliefs. And so, if I am to be justified in holding belief A, then I must have evidence, belief B, which lends support to A. But then if I am to be justified in holding belief B and evidence for A, I am only justified in doing so if I have evidence, belief C, for belief B. And so on. This is the regress. If an evidentialist is to object to religious belief on the grounds that they are not grounded in evidence, then, on pain of inconsistency, the evidentialist ought to be concerned to produce evidential justification for their own beliefs. In order to stop this regress, evidentialists see the need to appeal to foundationalism.

In any event, we can now more precisely state the evidentialist objection to religious belief. The evidentialist holds

> that a person is rational or reasonable in accepting theistic belief only if she has sufficient evidence for it—only if, that is, she knows or rationally believes some *other* propositions which support the one in question, and believes the latter on the basis of the former... According to the classical foundationalist, some

[43] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 59.

> propositions are *properly* or *rightly* basic for a person and some are not. Those that are not, are rationally accepted only on the basis of *evidence*, where the evidence must trace back, ultimately, to what is properly basic. The existence of God, furthermore, is not among the propositions that are properly basic; hence a person is rational in accepting theistic belief only if he has evidence for it.[44]

Notice that Plantinga doesn't attack the impetus to stop regresses of justification by an appeal to basic beliefs; he agrees that, epistemologically speaking, foundationalism is the best game in town. He assents to the foundationalist tenet that there is a proper order to noetic structures and that there must be a foundation if one is to ward of epistemic regresses of justification. But just because one thinks there is a need for foundationalism, does not mean that one needs to believe (CF). Plantinga's concern is not to do away with the distinctions between basic and nonbasic beliefs, or even the distinction between properly and improperly basic beliefs. Rather, he is concerned with the breadth or scope of what one is rational in taking to be basic. Plantinga points out that (CF) is really the conjunction of two claims. The first is that a proposition is properly basic *if* it is self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses. The second is that a proposition is properly basic *only if* it meets this condition.[45] The first seems plausible to him, but what about the second? Is there any good reason to accept the second claim? Plantinga doesn't think so. In challenging only the second claim, Plantinga seeks to widen the scope of what one might take as properly basic.

Plantinga takes inspiration from the view that Reformed thinkers like John Calvin held, "that belief in God need not be based on argument or evidence from other propositions at all. They mean to hold that the believer is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does even if he doesn't know of any good theistic argument (deductive or inductive), even if he

[44] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 41–42.

[45] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 59.

doesn't believe that there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists."[46] In this respect, religious believers are justified in believing in God in much the same way that they are justified in believing in the past, or the existence of other minds, or the existence of material objects.[47] For none of these types of belief can one provide non-circular arguments.[48] But it doesn't follow that one is not rational in believing, for example, in the existence of other minds. One is justified in holding these beliefs because they are (properly) basic beliefs.

Plantinga's goal, now coming sharply into focus, is to attack this principle of proper basicality as stated in (CF). He has two reasons for the dismissal of the classical criterion: First, (CF) seems to be too constrictive as a criterion for properly basic beliefs. Plantinga remarks,

> One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy – Descartes through Hume, roughly – is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable – at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more than probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible to me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is.[49]

If (CF) is true, it is entirely opaque how one's self-evident, incorrigible and sensory beliefs could support the majority of what we take to be reasonable beliefs about the world. The vast majority of our beliefs are left in the lurch. Of course Plantinga finds this consequence unacceptable and invites us to join him in this dissent. Against this implication of (CF) Plantinga simply asserts

[46] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 42.

[47] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 17.

[48] Cf. Chapter Two below.

[49] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 59–60.

that many such propositions *are* properly basic for human beings. Descriptively speaking, my belief that I have a headache, that I had breakfast this morning and that the other people in this room are not figments of my imagination are not held on the basis of other beliefs whose evidence makes them indubitable or even probable. Such beliefs are basic; they are in the foundation of my noetic structure.

Plantinga's second objection to (CF) is that it is self-referentially incoherent. The objection is an application of the principle – made famous by detractors of Hume's Fork and the Logical Positivists' verification theory of meaning – that in order to be acceptable, a normative criterion must pass its own test. We are encouraged to ask of any person who maintains (CF) if they are rational in accepting this principle of proper basicality. According to the foundationalist's own lights she will be rational in accepting (CF) only if it is self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses for her, or if it is believed on the basis of propositions that are properly basic for her and lend support to (CF). It is exceedingly difficult to see how (CF) could be demonstrated to follow from premises that are self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses for the foundationalist. Until someone shows how this could be done and can provide some kind of good argument for (CF) it is reasonable to assert that it cannot be supported by properly basic beliefs. The only other alternative is that (CF) is itself properly basic for the foundationalist. This would be all well and good if the foundationalist *didn't* assert (CF), but she does. Of course (CF) asserts that it does not count as properly basic. Consequently, (CF) impugns the foundationalist for unjustifiably maintaining (CF).

Plantinga concludes that in the absence of any good reason (or even the prospect of any good reason) to the contrary, one ought to dismiss (CF) and allow belief in God to be properly

basic.[50] Now, as I noted above, any good foundationalist may wish to reconfigure the evidentialist objection and submit it with different criterion for proper basicality. This will be, however, a tall order: "He must specify a criterion for proper basicality that is free from self-referential difficulties, rules out belief in God as properly basic, and is such that there is some reason to think it is true."[51] To say that it is a tall order is by no means to say that it is impossible, but it necessary that some new criterion be proffered before the philosophical community could evaluate it.

However, the purpose of having a criterion of rational belief is to satisfy the apparent epistemic need that we have a way of delineating, as far as beliefs go, the "good guys" from the "bad guys."[52] This, I think, is the real matter of justification – to give an account of one's beliefs or otherwise to make sense of why it is plausible to think as one does. Accordingly, many have objected that the Reformed criterion for rational belief is much too weak. That, in Plantinga's case, having such an open-ended widening of the criteria of properly basic beliefs is unacceptable because it is in effect to allow anything to pass as properly basic. Plantinga calls this "anything goes" concern the Great Pumpkin Objection.[53] He writes, "If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?"[54] Plantinga's answer is "certainly not." It does not follow that just because one rejects one

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[50] Plantinga, "Properly Basic," 49.

[51] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 62–63.

[52] Nicholas Rescher once characterized the purpose of justification this way to me in conversation.

[53] Others enjoy the variation, the "Flying Spaghetti Monster Objection."

[54] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 74.

criterion for properly basic, that one is committed to allow anything as properly basic. Plantinga points out that just because one might reject the Logical Positivists' Verification Theory of Meaning does not commit one to holding that

(7) Twas brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe.

is a well-formed and meaningful sentence. Analogously, Plantinga asks, "Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgments – positive or negative – about proper basicality? Surely not."[55] Even if one doesn't have a criterion of meaningfulness, he thinks that one is obviously permitted to declare (7) meaningless.[56]

Plantinga asserts, as we noted above, that neither (CF), "nor any other revealing necessary and sufficient condition for proper basicality follows from clearly self-evident

[55] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 75.

[56] This move seems somewhat specious to me. On the one hand, it is probably true that no language user carries around a full-fledged criterion of meaningfulness, stipulated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. It is certainly true that the rejection of one principle does not immediately commit one to a position where "anything goes." But to reject any potential candidates for basic beliefs does show that there are *some rules* acting to delineate between good and bad candidates. There have to be some rules, however incomplete, partial or implicit they are, otherwise the decision is purely arbitrary. Indeed, when the person rejects the "sentence" (7), one is already appealing to social, but implicit rules about grammar and meaning. Of course it is quite possible that we come across a society in which (7) is a meaningful statement. It is also possible that we develop rules so that such a statement would be rendered meaningful. But there is a reason that Plantinga is so ready to dismiss (7) as meaningless, and that is because he knows English. He cannot recognize any of the words as moves in the game, as Wittgenstein would put it. We should not confuse the implicitness or tacitness of a criterion for its non-existence; our inability to pick any out and explicitly state them does not show that there are no criteria at play. Nor should we, when we come to it, allow Plantinga's genetic account of how, socially or individually, we do in fact form criteria for proper basicality obscure the fact that in rejecting (7), one *is* employing at least implicit or tacit rules of meaning. Certainly we must – in some sense – know the rules before we ever employ them, and to distinguish between meaningful and non-meaningful sentences *is* an act of applying rules.

premises by clearly acceptable arguments."[57] The lesson to draw from the impossibility of this project is that "the proper way to arrive at [a criterion of properly basic belief] is, broadly speaking, *inductive*." To assert that there is no universally acceptable way to come up with a criterion of proper basicality is just to assert that there is no possibility of attaining a universally acceptable criterion. To put it another way, there is no universal rule for what constitutes proper basicality, and according to Plantinga, there never will be.

The notion that there could be, or even should be one, betrays a misconception of the genetic origins of any given criterion. The only way that we can form such criteria, socially or individually, is to compile a list of beliefs – or types of beliefs – that obviously satisfy our intuitions about basic beliefs. You may seem to remember having breakfast this morning, or that you've gone to London. You may believe that the person you are speaking to is a real person and not an automaton. In the absence of reasons to the contrary, you are perfectly entitled to take such beliefs as basic. You are still entitled even though none of these beliefs is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. If this flies in the face of (CF), then as Plantinga asserts, that fact ought to count not against you but against (CF).

Criteria arrived at in this inductive way will be inherently particularistic as it is certainly not the case that everyone will agree on the list of beliefs or types of beliefs that count as properly basic. So, the Christian will want to add "belief that God created the universe" and "God forgives our sins" and the like to this list and the atheist will not. "[B]ut how is that relevant?" Plantinga asks. "Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not

[57] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 76.

to theirs."[58] Of course, this is a very anti-Enlightenment way of thinking about rationality, and it grates on the sensibilities of many philosophers. But Plantinga argues that we can think of rationality in a non-universal way without it devolving into "anything goes"; "Particularism", he suggests, "does not imply *subjectivism*."[59]

> A former professor of mine for whom I had and have enormous respect once said that theists and nontheists have different conceptions of reason. At the time I did not know what he meant, but now I think I do. On the Reformed view I have been urging, the deliverances of reason include the existence of God just as much as perceptual truths, self-evident truths, memory truths, and the like. It is not that [the] theist and nontheist agree as to what reason delivers, the theist then going on to accept the existence of God by faith; there is, instead, disagreement in the first place as to what are the deliverances of reason.[60]

Hence, there is no conflict between faith and reason; instead, there are multiple kinds of rationality stemming from multiple and varying basic beliefs and practices of justification. The implication is that one is *prima facie* justified in one's belief if it meets the criteria given by the relevant social group – i.e. the one to which on belongs – and it is this, he thinks, that prevents his position from being a kind of fideism.

To sum up: we are looking for a way to explicate the conditions of possibility for successful cross-cultural deliberation. We saw that evidentialism provides an ostensibly convenient mechanism for doing this, by allowing us to adjudicate disagreements by an appeal to objective evidence. Part of the difficulty with this idea is that different communities take different items as evidence for their beliefs. Evidentialists meet this difficulty by putting

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[58] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 77.

[59] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 78.

[60] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 90.

constraints on what constitutes justification. In order to be justified in holding a belief, that belief must either be properly basic or be derivable from beliefs that are properly basic. However, what counts as "properly basic" is difficult to define in a productive way. If what is properly basic is too narrow – i.e., it is limited to what is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses – then many beliefs that we take as basic (i.e., memory beliefs, or belief that the world is older than five minutes etc.) are ruled out as not basic. Further, it's not clear how such beliefs could be derived from properly basic beliefs. Consequently, Plantinga argues that we should relax the constraints put on properly basic beliefs. But once we do so, there is no reason why religious beliefs should not fall into this category, that is, why religious beliefs should not be considered properly basic.

1.2. Towards a Reformed Criterion of Justified Belief

With evidentialism in its traditional form off the table, how is it that the Reformed epistemologists propose that we talk about justification and rational belief? It is important to note at the outset that it is really only on the *criticism* of evidentialism that the three preeminent Reformed epistemologists agree. But this basic criticism aside, the three go in varied directions

as to the content and nature of justification.[61] For example, while Plantinga is skeptical of – and sometimes acts downright baffled by – the deontologist's claim that one has epistemological duties; Nicholas Wolterstorff, at any rate, is not: "What seems rather to be the case is that each of us has the obligation with respect to certain propositions *to do as well as can rightly be demanded* of us so as to bring it about that we believe them if they are true and disbelieve them if they are false."[62] On the other hand, all three agree that showing that religious believers are rational in their beliefs requires a recasting of the deontological obligations of belief – moving from a *universalistic* criterion (i.e., the evidentialists' belief that one is obligated not simply to one's community, but to universal strictures of Reason) to a *contextual* one. And they all agree that the foundationalist's criterion for justified belief to be too stringent.

What then do the Reformed epistemologists have in mind when they talk about a belief's being justified? There are a great many nuances in the presentations of these three thinkers, and for the sake of clarity we will focus on Wolterstorff's criterion for justified belief. However, it should be noted that William P. Alston dissents from Wolterstorff and Plantinga even in broad outline as to the primary nature of justification.[63] Alston argues that a deontic concept of

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[61] It is worth noting that Plantinga has since eschewed the use of the term 'justification' as he seems to think that the question of the *quid juris* of the believer has been settled, and with a positive verdict. In turning to questions of knowledge he has opted for a kind of reliabilism and has therefore employed terms like 'positive epistemic status' and 'warrant' instead of 'justification.'

[62] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 149. (Emphasis is Wolterstorff's.)

[63] Though it should be noted that in his later writings Wolterstorff gave up the project – and advised that others also give up the project – of picking out necessary and sufficient criterion for what constitutes 'justification' claiming that justification is a big tent, encompassing many differing epistemic desirables with no one having sole claim to the label 'justification'. Cf. his "Epistemic Desiderata" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 53, no. 3. (Sept.

justification is flawed because it presumes that one's beliefs are under *voluntary* control. This is a mistake according to Alston. Beliefs are formed *in* individuals, not *by* individuals, we might say, and it is not usually in our power to dissuade ourselves from having the beliefs that we have. If there is any sense in talking about a person's being normatively or deontically justified, Alston takes it for granted that most people are justified in holding beliefs at least in some weak sense when those beliefs formed by generally reliable mechanisms like sense perception. Wolterstorff and Plantinga hold that individuals do, minimally, have some culpable degree of control over the mechanisms (or "dispositions" as Wolterstorff, following Thomas Reid, calls them) that produce beliefs and that by properly governing these mechanisms we have at least indirect control over what beliefs we have. However, because the three agree that religious believers are, at least minimally, justified in a normative, and specifically, deontic sense (again, noting Alston's proviso), we can take Wolterstorff's account of rationality as paradigmatic of what someone who assents to a "Reformed epistemology" might maintain.

What, then, does it mean for a belief to be justified? Wolterstorff agrees with evidentialists that justification is inherently a normative, and specifically a deontic concern. For Wolterstorff, being justified in holding a belief *p* should be thought of as performing one's epistemic *duties*, or being within one's epistemic *rights*: "When we speak of a person as *justified* in holding some belief, often, perhaps always, what we mean is that the person is *permitted* to hold that belief."[64] So, justification is to be thought of as permission, in a sense; it means that one has done right by the duties and that a believer is in a proper relationship to one's beliefs. It

1993), 527–551. Notably, Wolterstorff denies the notion that there are a plurality of forms of justification. Wolterstorff argues that Goldman, Alston, and their ilk, are simply confused in using the word 'justification' with a reliabilist meaning. See Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 183–184, ft. 12.

[64] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 157.

is important for Wolterstorff that a person's beliefs can not only be justified by what one has cognitive *access* to, but also by what one is *aware* of. In other words, his is an *internalist* position: the reliability of the belief forming mechanism (i.e., the *likelihood* of its producing true beliefs independent of *our knowledge* of whether or not it produces true beliefs) is of no consequence when we are discussing justification. Consequently, it is possible that one be *justified* in believing something that is *false*, and it is possible to be *unjustified* in believing something that is *true*. Externalist positions, like reliabilism, "no matter how formulated, will not be a correct criterion of rational belief."[65] The primary reason for Wolterstorff's rejection of externalism is based on, more or less, common sense intuitions about what the word 'justification' means. He thinks that the reliabilist picture simply doesn't capture what we mean when we talk about justification. What more, he asks, can be demanded of a person than that they do right by the information that they have, that they do as well as they can to ascertain truth in the beliefs that they acquire?[66] If a mechanism reliably produces true beliefs but a person has reasons to think that it is not, then Wolterstorff thinks our intuition says that that person is unjustified in continuing to hold beliefs on the basis of that mechanism. Conversely, if a mechanism is unreliable, but a person has reasons to think that it is, then Wolterstorff thinks our intuition says that that person is justified in holding beliefs on the basis of that mechanism.

As a result, when philosophers like Goldman and Alston use the word 'justification' to denote the truth conductivity that formed the belief, then they are simply in error about what 'justification' means. Wolterstorff writes, "The situation is not, I think, that Goldman and others

[65] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 160.

[66] Cf. Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 160. Of course this very obviously is already a question framed by Wolterstorff's deontic and voluntaristic conception of justification. Reliabilists are not as concerned by a person meeting their epistemic *obligations* as they are in the *truth conductivity* of the mechanisms that produce those beliefs.

are offering a criterion for a different concept of justified belief from that for which I propose to offer a criterion. The situation is rather than Goldman misapprehends the nature of the concept of justified belief."[67] He suggests instead that there just "is no sense of the English word 'justified'" that corresponds to their usage. In other words, the normative or deontic conception of justification is just what we mean by the word 'justified' when we say that a person is justified in holding a belief.

In broad strokes, we can characterize Wolterstorff's criterion of justified belief, as he does himself, by suggesting that beliefs are "innocent until proven guilty," not vice versa. Since he is creating a *normative* criterion for justification, Wolterstorff employs the intuitive principle that one is only responsible for what one is aware of. One cannot have obligations in regards to what one has no awareness of (if that unawareness, or ignorance, is not culpable, of course). This is applied directly to the genesis of our beliefs that are formed by our natural belief forming mechanisms, or "dispositions"; one is rational in believing the deliverances of one's natural belief forming dispositions unless one has evidence of their unreliability. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, one is *prima facie* justified in holding a belief produced by one's natural belief forming mechanisms. The key word here, of course, is "evidence." It does not matter one bit that one's belief forming dispositions are corrupted or horribly unreliable for purposes of rational justification *unless one has reason to think that they are in fact unreliable*. The key element is what the agent is *aware* of, not what *is* actually, independently of the believer's awareness, the case. Of course, if a person has such information, even if they are ignoring it, they are culpable for the beliefs that they have and are so far forth, unjustified in their believings.

[67] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 184, ft. 12.

Aside from this broadly genetic component, Wolterstorff thinks that a criterion must also have an explicitly *noetic* element. That is, "whether a person's belief that *q* provides him with an adequate reason for his believing *p* depends, in general, on the other beliefs that person has."[68] This may seem like an odd statement given the presumed innocence of our beliefs that are naturally produced. Wolterstorff is sensitive to this tension: "Rationality in one's beliefs does not await one's believing them on the basis of adequate reasons. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of having reasons does play a central and indispensable role in rationality – a rationality-*removing* role."[69] So it is not as if Wolterstorff is suddenly falling in with the evidentialists, and is a Reformed epistemologist in name only. No, beliefs are innocent until proven guilty. And this means, in part, that one need not hold off on believing until one has adequate reason to do so. So if it appears to me that there is a bowl of peanuts on the desk in a friend's room, in the absence of reasons to think that my sense faculties are amiss, then I am perfectly justified in holding the belief that there is a bowl of peanuts on the desk in my friend's room. On the other hand, if in addition to that belief, I have another belief that my friend is acutely allergic to peanuts and that if there were a bowl of peanuts in the room she wouldn't be able to carry on the pleasant conversation we're having, then I would not be justified in *continuing* to hold that belief. This latter belief would serve as a "defeater" for the former. In other words, a defeater provides a strong reason to think that a particular belief is *false*.

In this way, the noetic gauntlet of our other beliefs is not dismissed as irrelevant to justification; but, importantly, Wolterstorff does not grant the gauntlet a positive or preemptive role and maintain that our beliefs must first pass through the gauntlet before we are justified in

[68] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 165.

[69] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 164.

holding them. To deny this point would be to deny the presumption of innocence that Wolterstorff affords beliefs. Again, awareness plays a key role here. It might be the case that a person has sufficient reason to give up a belief that she holds, but that she is not *aware* of this reason. It is only when one is unaware of the presence of defeaters for a belief that one is justified in persisting in holding that belief. On the other hand, it is possible that a person be culpably ignorant of the presence of a defeater. One might suspect that there is a defeater for a belief somewhere in one's noetic structure but intentionally resist following up on this lead. In so doing, one gives up the *prima facie* justification of that belief. The role of other beliefs as defeaters remains strictly negative. We can call this requirement that one's noetic structure be free of defeaters *negative coherence.*

So, our beliefs are innocent until proven guilty. That is, beliefs are naturally justified *unless* one has either "evidence that the proposition believed is false or evidence that the disposition which produced the belief is unreliable."[70] One is naturally justified in holding beliefs, but when one becomes aware of the faultiness of the mechanism that produced the beliefs or beliefs that constitute adequate reason to surrender one's beliefs (i.e., to think that the belief is false), then one is *obliged* to give up the belief. The notions of obligation and justification carry the normative weight that Wolterstorff wishes his criterion to bear. These reflections combine to lead Wolterstorff to posit the following criterion:

> A person *S* is rational in his eluctable and innocently produced belief B*p* if and only if *S* does believe *p*, and either:
>
> i) *S* neither has nor ought to have adequate reason to cease from believing *p*, and is not rationally obliged to believe that he *does* have adequate reason to cease; or

[70] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 171.

ii) *S* does have adequate reason to cease from believing *p* but does not realize that he does, and is rationally justified in that.[71]

Wolterstorff reflects, "the criterion I have offered not only takes the phenomenon of *not having adequate reason to surrender one's belief* as the key phenomenon determining rationality; it adds to this an explicitly noetic-normative component."[72] The idea that one's beliefs take central stage in determining whether or not a belief is rational marks a radical departure from Enlightenment theories of rationality where rationality hinges on the object and universal dictates of Reason. Not so, argues Wolterstorff – rationality is not relative to the objective dictates of Reason (which we do not have undisputed access to), but to the beliefs of each individual.

Hence, Wolterstorff's emphasis that a proper criterion of justified belief take into explicit consideration the beliefs that a given person has, leads to a profoundly contextual view of rationality. Wolterstorff is adamant about this point:

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[71] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 168. Plantinga's account of justification is nearly identical, but instead of emphasizing the coherence of the beliefs that one holds, he makes reference to criteria produced by individual communities pave a way for us to understand how one is justified holding a belief: "Let us say that a belief is justified for a person at a time if (a) he is violating no epistemic duties and is within his epistemic rights in accepting it then and (b) his noetic structure is not defective by virtue of his then accepting it. Then my being appeared to in this characteristic way (together with other circumstances) is what confers on me the right to hold the belief in question; this is what justifies me in accepting it" (Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 79). The internal rules of a community thus dictate what counts *prima facie* justification for belief. Of course, when prima facie justification is conferred in this way, it is a very weak normative conception of justification. After all, whether conditions (a) and (b) are met in believing in God depends a great deal on whether the community one belongs to accepts belief in God as basic. In other words, whether or not you are flouting some epistemic duty is determined by people who, almost by definition, agree with you. However, there are some constrictions placed upon justification. First, it is required that there is an absence of reasons to think that the faculties that produced such beliefs are in working order (We'll have to leave alone the pressing issue that one could never test the veracity of one's natural dispositions for belief in God in any usual way for the time being). Second, it is required that there is an absence of defeaters. That is, the believer must not be aware of any arguments to show that her belief is in fact false or show any strong reason to think that it is. But if both of these further conditions are met, it is certainly reasonable and justified for one to maintain belief in God.

[72] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 170.

> Rationality of belief can only be determined in context – historical and social contexts, and, even more narrowly, personal context. It has long been the habit of philosophers to ask in abstract, nonspecific fashion whether it is rational to believe that God exists, whether it is rational to believe that there is an external world, whether it is rational to believe that there are other persons, and so on. Mountains of confusion have resulted. The proper question is always and only whether it is rational for this or that particular person in this or that situation, or for a person of this or that particular type in this or that type of situation, to believe so-and-so. Rationality is always *situated* rationality.[73]

This is of course consistent with the constraints of his criterion. A person can only be held responsible with respect to *what they are aware of*, not, of course, what they aren't aware of. Justification of a belief is always produced relative to other of the beliefs one holds, *not* to some transcendent standard of rationality. Hence, for example, the anti-theist line that belief in God is absolutely irrational or irrational *writ large*, so to speak, is untenable. Not only is it untenable, but for Wolterstorff, it hardly makes any sense. To make such a claim is just to misunderstand what justification is about. There is only what it is rational for so-and-so to believe: "Whether a given person is in fact rational in such belief cannot be answered in general and in the abstract, however. It can only be answered by scrutinizing the belief system of the individual believer and the ways in which that believer has used his noetic capacities."[74]

Thus, the only way that you can critique the beliefs of other is, for Wolterstorff, to press them on the grounds that the mechanism that produced the belief is unreliable, or that it is or ought to be defeated by other of one's beliefs. In effect, this undermines the evidentialist position that, regardless of whether or not God does exist – we can't know such a thing to be true anyway – belief in God is always irrational in a general sense. Instead, one is *prima facie*

[73] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 155.

[74] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" 176.

justified in holding theistic beliefs, and one can only be pushed out of such a position on grounds of inconsistency, that is, on grounds that one's other beliefs turn out to show that theistic belief to be false or show that belief to be likely to be false. One can easily see how accepting Wolterstorff's writing sets a new tone for objectors to religious belief: "Rather than demanding evidence from the enthusiast, one offers him adequate reasons for the falsehood of his beliefs."[75] According to Wolterstorff, then, one can press people on the consistency of their beliefs and one can offer reasons why the belief-forming mechanisms of a particular culture are not reliable, but one cannot simply make the general claim that religious belief is irrational.

If one combines Wolterstorff's *normative* account of justification and Plantinga's argument that the only way to produce a criterion for proper basicality is *inductive*, gleaned from the beliefs of one's community, you have a strong attack aimed at undermining the evidentialist's assertion that in order to be justified one must have evidential support for one's beliefs. In fact, one's beliefs, if there is no reason to suspect otherwise, are already *prima facie* justified and can only be given up by virtue of a defeating relation between other beliefs *that the believer holds*. Consequently, there is no objective or community independent standard of rationality that the evidentialist can invoke to claim that religious believers are being irrational. This is truly a position of defensive impregnability that the Reformed epistemologists have created – the religious believer is to be considered rational provided that she is not ignoring any epistemic duties and that she has no reason to think the faculties that gave rise to the belief are defective. If these conditions are met, what grounds could one have for critiquing the believer's rationality from outside?

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[75] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" 177.

1.3. On the Necessity of an Alternative to Reformed Epistemology

The upshot of the Reformed epistemologists' restructuring of rationality is that the religious believer is justified in holding the beliefs that she has as long as she is not flouting any epistemic duty of which she is aware or culpably unaware. Religious belief is already rational as it stands; there is no need for evidence to bestow upon it its justification. It seems, then, that the Reformed epistemologists are successful in rebutting the evidentialists' purported obligation to give objective, community independent evidence for their beliefs. In essence, all of their arguments deny the obligation to provide such reasons for their belief. As we saw above, the Reformed epistemologists explicitly *deny* Enlightenment epistemic standards, and in so doing, deny the need – or perhaps even the possibility – of providing external reasons for religious belief.

However, to return to the main line of my argument and the task of finding the conditions of possibility of successful cross-cultural deliberation, it should be clear that the Reformed epistemologist account of justification is not going to be of help. Indeed, it's plausible to charge the Reformed epistemologists as inappropriately shifting the burden of proof in polemical debate. Their claim is, essentially, I have my beliefs and if they bother you, it's incumbent upon *you* to show how I'm wrong; it is not incumbent upon *me* to justify them to you with reasons that you find acceptable. In opposition to the evidentialists' idea that you ought not believe something unless you have good reasons, that beliefs are *guilty* until demonstrated to be

innocent, the Reformed epistemologists hold the credo that all beliefs are innocent until proven guilty. In expanding what counts as a properly basic belief, the Reformed epistemologists have successfully changed the tone of the conversation regarding justification of religious belief. However, in undermining the universalistic criterion that one's belief are rational or irrational, justified or unjustified in proportion to how they conform to the dictates of reason, they undermine the evidentialists' positive contribution to cross-cultural deliberation – that is, the contribution of providing a useful criterion for adjudicating disagreements. While I agree with Wolterstorff's weakened conception of rationality (i.e., one that is not universal and monolithic, but contextual and relative to the beliefs of individuals), accepting his position does, at least initially, move us away from our goal of explicating the conditions of successful cross-cultural deliberation.

Keep in mind that successful cross-cultural deliberation – *qua* deliberation – requires that individuals be able to give rational grounds for thinking that one worldview or system of beliefs is superior to another. What the Reformed epistemologists have given us is a reason to think that believers from virtually any cultural system are justified in continuing to hold the beliefs that they *currently* hold. As Alston puts it, "In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, *the only rational course for me to take is to sit tight* with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world."[76] This statement shows how the purpose of the Reformed epistemologists grates against their own interests in progressively giving sound, and possibly superior, reasons for the hope and beliefs they hold. To put it another way, the Reformed

[76] William P. Alston, "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God" in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 204. Emphasis mine.

epistemologists have given us reason to think that believers from various cultural stripes are in a position of parity with regard to one another. It may very well be true that they are *prima facie* justified in holding the beliefs that they do, but it is of no help, of course, to someone who is looking for a mechanism for saying that one position is *better* than another. Arguing to parity is an excellent defensive tool if one is under philosophical assault. It is a way of saying, "Regardless of how good or bad you say my beliefs are, they are still rationally on a par with yours." It is a defensive position, excellent at diffusing assaults, but utterly unhelpful in arguing that your position is superior.

Further, we must ask, "Does the Reformed epistemologists' position lead to a form of relativism?" Consider again the Great Pumpkin objection. Plantinga maintains that any believer is only responsible to his or her community. But isn't it possible that there be a society in which belief in the Great Pumpkin was part of their cultural heritage? And wouldn't we want to critique their beliefs as being somehow rationally deficient? But Plantinga's conception of justification is too weak in the sense that it can't be used to convince anyone else, anyone outside of one's group of the truth, or really even the reasonableness of one's beliefs because they simply won't have the same criteria or practices of justification. In other words, the Reformed epistemologists' conception of rationality is *polemically ineffective*. The claim of incommensurability of epistemic practices, like the claim of a diversity of justificatory practices, are the other side of the coin of Plantinga's concern for defensive impregnability. If that is the case, then it seems all but impossible that the Reformed epistemologists will be able to provide grounds for comparing belief systems. If we want to uncover a mechanism for adjudicating cross-cultural disagreements, we need something other than what the Reformed epistemologists offer.

Others have expressed similar concerns about the ramifications of Reformed epistemology. Of those who are sympathetic to their project and yet think the basic idea can be improved on, perhaps the most notable is George Mavrodes. As he points out, having one's noetic structure safeguarded against the charge of irrationality is a good and significant thing, but this is not all that religious believers may epistemically aspire to:

> A person who wants his beliefs to be rational, in the Plantinga-Wolterstorff sense, has so far put forth a minimal ambition for his beliefs. His desire is analogous to that of a person who wants his actions to be legal. Many people, in fact, have that desire about their own actions, and there is nothing wrong with it. But hardly anyone satisfies himself with such a minimal ambition. Most people also want something else for their actions…. Now one persistent and common desire which people have for their beliefs is that those beliefs should be true, should correspond somehow with reality, should "tell it like it is," and so on.[77]

This "truth ambition" is a second, separate epistemic ambition from the desire to be merely deontically justified in holding one's beliefs. Indeed, most people of intellectual integrity are not satisfied with the bare minimum – with only not having done anything wrong. They want to say their beliefs are *right*, that they are *true*.

Parallel to these two epistemic ambitions, as Mavrodes would have it, are the two tasks of the apologist: negative and positive. A person engaged in negative apologetics will try to show "that apparent reasons against theistic belief (for example, the problem of evil and such) are not as strong as they appear, that they will not stand up under careful scrutiny, and so on."[78] It is

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[77] George I. Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 209.

[78] Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," 197.

important that while this task is quite useful as far as it goes, it does not (by itself[79]) give any positive reason for a person coming to believe in the truth of theism or anything else. Negative apologetics is the task of removing obstacles to belief, and a useful and important task it is. However, an apologist might have the further goal of converting someone to her own faith; that is, of demonstrating to someone who has different beliefs that her own are better or more likely to be true. Implicit in this desire is the notion that the lack of positive reasons for belief, beyond the concern that religious belief is irrational, is part of what is keeping a person, or a population more generally, from belief in God. We could say that positive apologetics is the task of showing that religious belief is better or superior in some sense.

Believing that they have rebuffed the evidentialists' challenge that religious belief is on its face irrational, the Reformed epistemologists (well, Alston and Plantinga at any rate) turned to a second question. As Plantinga puts it, as a result of their earlier work, the religious believer is in a position where *if* Christianity or theism is *true*, then the corresponding belief in it is justified. Tired of discussing the rationality of religious belief, Plantinga tries to move the debate about religious belief out of the realm of deontic justification and back towards questions of truth. Plantinga argues that the question of justification cannot be settled without reference to the question of truth. Plantinga hopes to move objectors to religious belief away from the objection that religious belief is irrational, or unjustified and to get them to tangle with what he sees as the more important question – do we have reasons to think that religious doctrines are *true*? In technical language, Plantinga seeks to transmute the question "by what right do you hold X?" (the *de jure* objection to religious belief) into the question, "is X *true*?" (the *de facto* question).

[79] It is possible to imagine someone who has – independently – very good reasons for believing in the truth of, for example, Christianity, but who takes it to be defeated by some argument or evidence. In this case, undermining that argument or evidence against Christianity (i.e. doing negative apologetics) might be sufficient to cause someone to convert.

By making the question of the truth of religious belief preeminent, we may have a mechanism for adjudicating cultural disagreements, for showing how one particular religious system could be seen to be true. The remainder of this chapter will examine the question, "Do the Reformed epistemologists provide the resources with which one might try to set about showing a nonbeliever that religious belief is reasonable in this new positive sense?"

Alston and Plantinga set about making an argument for the truth of Christianity (though of course the argument could be recast in analogous ways for other faiths) by showing how it is possible to have knowledge of God. If they can show that it is possible to have knowledge of God, this would provide reason to think that the relevant Christian doctrines are true.[80] This looks at first blush to be exactly the kind of theory that we want – a mechanism which could give positive reasons for thinking that one system, the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc. is better than another. Plantinga and Alston are united in agreement that, generally speaking, it is something like experience that undergirds the vast majority religious beliefs and provides what epistemic support they have and forms the ground of our knowledge of God. And, as a matter of empirical fact, religious believers, in their self-reports, often do credit religious experience as having one

[80] Another candidate for demonstrating knowledge of God would be natural theology – or rational proofs of God's existence and attributes. Plantinga has expressed some support for certain proofs of religious beliefs, most importantly his support of a variation of the ontological proof for the existence of God: "I believe there are a large number (at least a couple dozen) good arguments for the existence of God; none, however, can really be thought of as a *showing* or *demonstration*. As for classical Christianity, there is even less prospect of demonstrating its truth. Of course this is nothing against either their truth or their warrant; very little of what we believe can be 'demonstrated' or 'shown'" (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170). The implication is that there are no arguments that can serve as the nails in the coffin of atheism. One can try to hold the lid down with all the arguments at one's disposal, but the spectral figure keeps popping back to life. And indeed, it is true that no proofs of the existence of God are universally accepted or universally compelling. The arguments for the existence of God appeal largely to those who already believe in God. And even among theists there is considerable debate about the logical coherence of these arguments as well as about the need of a theist to have such proofs.

of the largest roles in the acquisition and continuance of religious belief, rather than something like a proof of the existence of God from natural theology. If the mechanism that produces such knowledge is available to all members of a diverse conversation (like experience), then this looks like an excellent candidate for providing non-circular reasons why one system is better than another. Another way of saying this, if one can reasonably say that they have knowledge of God, this would entail that their beliefs are true. So, what is their account of knowledge?

In explaining how it might be possible to have knowledge of God, the Reformed epistemologists were inspired by the often overlooked Scottish Enlightenment thinker Thomas Reid. In so doing each, of our protagonists developed a concern for the mechanisms that produce religious belief. They thought they would be remiss to speak only in the abstract and not consider the mechanisms that produce the very beliefs that they are analyzing. For many thinkers, however, it is not at all obvious that the *psychological* mechanisms of belief formation *are* relevant. The intuition that the Reformed epistemologists are working with is that, despite epistemology's penchant for being a purely cerebral enterprise, the concrete realities of the genesis of the beliefs of human beings cannot be ignored. And if we are to find positive reasons for thinking one community's beliefs are better than another, this is an avenue that should not go unexplored.

In reflecting on how we come by our beliefs and on the relevance of Thomas Reid to the conversation, Wolterstorff writes,

> It was Reid's great genius to perceive that if we want to understand knowledge and rationality, we cannot talk only about the abstract relations holding among propositions, along the way making unreflective assumptions about the 'mechanisms' which form our beliefs. We must look head-on at the psychological 'mechanisms'

> involved in belief formation. Articulate epistemology requires articulate psychology.[81]

The Reformed epistemologists agree with Reid. Though the terminology and breadth of their considerations may differ, they all hold that humans are so disposed to generate beliefs based on the testimony of their natural faculties, i.e., sense perception, memory, reason, etc. For example, it is natural for me, when I seem to see a horse that I form the belief "there is a horse nearby." Or if it appears to me that I am writing a paper in a coffee shop, or that I remember having eggs for breakfast, then I am disposed to form the corresponding belief. In fact, it would be the mark of an illness or some kind of malfunction if I did *not* form corresponding beliefs such as these given the fact that I am appeared to thus and so. And this is so even if I have been convinced by an irresponsible philosophy professor that solipsism is true, and so I set about to resist forming the belief that there are physical entities and other human beings around. In this case I may be performing my *epistemic* duties by resisting the formation of such beliefs, but certainly the resulting behavior would be akin to a severe *psychological* disorder.

The Reformed epistemologists hold that beliefs formed on such a basis are *prima facie* justified. That is, a person allowing one's natural dispositions to do their work generating beliefs from the way that things appear to one is normatively justified in maintaining the resulting beliefs in a preliminary way. This *prima facie* justification is only shattered in the presence of *defeaters* to the belief or reasons to believe that the mechanism that produced the belief have been in some way corrupted or are somehow malfunctioning. From this unified starting point, Alston and Plantinga add their account of belief forming mechanisms as a means for producing *knowledge*. The concern is whether or not the belief forming mechanism can be said to reliably produce true beliefs. Alston calls this externalist concern "evaluative justification" while

[81] Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" 149.

Plantinga, desiring to preserve the term "justification" to denote deontic epistemic rationality – i.e., committing no epistemic offenses – dubs this externalist concern "warrant." Thus, warrant is that element, when added to true belief, results in knowledge. In order to ease lexical confusion between deontic and evaluative justification, I will adopt Plantinga's terminology and use the term "warrant" when discussing that element that grants positive epistemic status, in this sense, to beliefs.

What both Alston and Plantinga emphasize is that warrant is concerned with the reliability or truth conductivity of belief forming mechanisms. Hence, beliefs formed by reliable belief forming mechanisms are, by definition, those likely to be true; for it is warrant, when added to true belief that can result in an affirmative claim of *knowledge*. While there is no external or non-circular way (i.e., independent of employing the very mechanisms in question) to test the reliability of belief forming practices such as sense experience, Alston takes it that sense perception is the paradigm case for a reliable belief forming mechanism.[82] And while Wolterstorff and Plantinga disagree with Alston about what constitutes justification, they agree that *experience*, broadly construed, is the locus or the origin of a great many of our religious beliefs and is the root of religious warrant. We believe that God exists because we perceive God, or we experience God in the world.

[82] A full explication of Alston's argument would take the conversation too far afield from the main line of my argument, so I will just take his argument for granted. However, there is a good bit of resonance between Alston's argument about *circularity* of arguments for the reliability of belief forming mechanisms and the *hermeneutical* argument I make using Wittgenstein in Chapter 2. The upshot is basically that one cannot logically ground practices as a whole, they are simply facets of human life. To demand an *external* justification for their use is to make a kind of category mistake. What *could* count, for example, as positive justification for the reliability of one's senses? It doesn't make sense to talk about justifying the senses *überhaupt*.

As Alston and Plantinga develop this point the furthest, we shall focus on their reasons for thinking that various experiential belief dispositions can reliably function to produce true beliefs about God. Alston lays out what he takes to be typical examples such experiential beliefs:

> [T]he belief that God is sustaining one in being, pouring out His love into one, communicating a certain message to one, or simply presenting Himself to one as supremely good or powerful. The experiences I take to constitute (putative) perceptions of God range over any cases in which the subject takes herself to be aware of God as presenting Himself to her experience. This includes, but is not restricted to, "mystical" experiences of the classic type in which one seems, momentarily, to lose one's identity in merging with the divine. It also includes dim background experiences of the presence of God as well as more vivid and shorter lasting focal experiences. And it ranges over both experiences that are and those that are not mediated by sense perception of the physical and social environment.[83]

Alston's account is unique because it focuses on the mechanisms or "doxastic practices" that give rise to such experiential beliefs. He calls the doxastic practices which give rise to religious beliefs such as those arrayed above, "mystical perceptual practices" (MP).[84] In order to make the case that the doxastic practices which give rise to these beliefs about God are reliable, Alston focuses on building up a case for the reliability of beliefs based on another more familiar source, sense-perceptual practices (SP), and then by parity with SP, claiming that MP are also reliable. Thus, what Alston is ultimately arguing is that it is reasonable to think that the belief forming mechanisms found among religious communities are reliable indicators of the existence and nature of God. *If* sense perceptual practices are reliable, he argues, then so are mystical

[83] Alston, "Religious Diversity," 194–195.

[84] The terminology that Alston employs changes from time to time, I am using the terms "mystical perceptual practice" and "sense-perceptual practice" as they are introduced in his seminal work *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), page 103.

perceptual practices. And correspondingly, the beliefs produced by such mechanisms are likely to be *true*.

Of course the argument Alston makes is largely contingent upon his ability to make this case for parity, and this case largely consists in answering objections to the effect that there are in fact relevant differences between the beliefs formed on the basis of SP and those based on MP. I do not want to spend the space here to develop the details, as the ultimate relevance of his argument (and my criticism of it) for this project comes in elsewhere. Let us take it for granted that Alston has successfully made his case that if SP is reliable, then MP is also reliable. Further, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Alston has provided reasons for thinking SP to be reliable. The point I wish to make is that even if these preliminary goals are granted, and Alston earns the primary points that he argues for, there are still fundamental problems with thinking that the positive reasons for holding a belief are present, as he says, only from *within* the community in question.

Now, it is integral for Alston's argument that the basic doxastic practices can have no external support of their reliability. After all, what else can we use to test the reliability of sense perception *other than our senses*? Thinking of particular uses of sense perception, we might think that one sense perception can lend support for another. It seems to us at a distance that we see a rectangular tower. It is only upon approach that we can use our senses to verify that perception. It is not reason or memory or any other belief forming faculties by themselves that swoop in to verify the perception – it is only the faculty itself that can internally examine itself. But what if we are to widen our scope to include the reliability of the whole of sense perception and ask what can support it? There is nothing that can do so. We have to *use* our senses to determine its reliability. The only support that can be offered doxastic practices as a whole are

self-support. And, "[s]ince we are at a loss to specify what such non-circular reasons would look like even if the method is reliable, we should not regard the practitioner as irrational for lacking such reasons."[85]

Alston argues that by parity, the reliability of MPs like that found in the Christian faith, may not be accessible "externally," but if this does not trouble us with SP, then it should not with Christian belief forming practices (CP):

> [w]hy should we suppose that any reliable doxastic practice will bear external marks of its reliability for all, participants and non-participants alike, to see? That is not the case for familiar, universal, non-controversial practices like SP. SP's marks of reliability are displayed… only from within the practice. Why should we suppose it to be otherwise with respect to religious, non-universal practices? Why suppose that if CP is a by and large reliable cognitive access to certain aspects of God, that reliability could be ascertained from other practices, when that is not the case with SP? And from *within* CP, just as from *within* SP, there are abundant indications of reliability.[86]

Clearly, if Alston is right, there is a significant amount of "Balkanization" when we consider the myriad theological belief systems and their corresponding doxastic practices. After all, could not every religion make the same claim to reliability in their respective communities? Alston believes that they can. What is odd about Alston's considerations, and which is acknowledged by Alston though apparently without much concern, is that MPs in various communities produce different and incompatible beliefs. A plausible explanation as to why this is the case is that one's experiences are in some degree constituted by one's beliefs and upbringing. This leads to the result that different MPs lead to different beliefs about God. Ultimately, belief-forming mechanisms like MP are essentially practical disciplines for Alston, and about this he may be

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[85] Alston, "Religious Diversity," 203.

[86] Alston, "Religious Diversity," 201.

right. The idea is that it is through habit that one begins to form beliefs based directly on sense experience without all the intermediary interpretive baggage. Similarly, one might become habituated such that religious beliefs are also created solely on the basis of one's experience (eliding theology as an interpretive framework). So at some point, when we have acquired some degree of mastery over a belief-forming practice, we no longer appeal to auxiliary beliefs to undergird this particular belief, we just take the belief in question as properly basic.

Alston rejects a way of resolving these problems by an appeal to an inference to the best explanation, as if our experiences sit on one level and that on a another level what we need to do is pick out the best theological superstructure to fit the phenomena. The point of such a view is to assign the predicate *true* to the superstructure that sits most neatly on the foundation of experience. This provides a clean way – in theory at least – of assigning truth and falsity to theological systems, but it is one to which Alston does not assent. He writes, "I shall resist the bifurcation of Christian experience into psychological datum and theological explanation and defend the original claim that it is God Himself, or, if you like, some activity or aspect of God, that is directly presented or given to our experience in these transactions."[87] The idea is that our theological beliefs are not something separable from our mechanisms for producing beliefs but are part and parcel of it. Hence, we ought not think of theological doctrines as *explanations* of phenomena. Indeed, we might say that people of different cultural communities experience the world differently.

However, this makes the fact that there are a variety of religious beliefs produced by experience all the more important if those beliefs are, least in some cases, immediately formed

[87] William P. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 107.

on the basis of pure experience. What could possibly account for correlations among religious beliefs and communities other than the fact that each community responsible for the socialization of doxastic practices in individuals themselves hold differing beliefs? Indeed, just because a belief-forming mechanism is grounded in experience doesn't mean that mechanism isn't shaped directly or indirectly by the beliefs of the community. After all, Christians train their youth to perceive a "pulling" to help someone in need as the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The *reason* that we train young Christians to see the Holy Spirit at work here, and not in the sudden satanic impetus to harm an innocent animal, is that we believe the former to be right, the latter to be wrong. In other words, we believe the Holy Spirit to love righteousness and joy, not torment and suffering. What determines for individuals whether or not an experience is *of* God other than one's beliefs about the nature of the deity? "God told me to hurt my sister!" "No, He didn't." It's difficult to determine causal order in the context of learning, but it could plausibly be suggested that the beliefs about the deity are epistemically prior to the information experience gives us and are thus the part of the *cause*, rather than the effect of such experiences. Another way of making this point is that we, empirically, can have experiences or "leadings" that point in opposite directions (for the same person or for different people). Experience *itself* cannot adjudicate a disagreement between experiences. Rather, we must circumspectively make judgments *about* our experience in such cases.[88] The ground of accepting or contesting religious experience, and hence of educating our children and helping them develop their doxastic practices is always on the grounds of other background beliefs we hold. As Kant states, "Even

[88] Of course experience may only be thematized – or we may only become circumspectively aware of experience – in this way when experience as a belief forming mechanism "breaks down." For example, when there is cognitive dissonance within an individual or when individuals claim experiences that lead to different beliefs or actions. But of course, when we are in the middle of cross-cultural deliberations, this is almost universally the case.

the Holy One of the gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as such."[89] Even when it is not called into explicit cognitive awareness, it is part of the structure that orients and filters our mature experiences.

Often we control (either directly or indirectly) our own belief acquisitions, or the community controls the mechanism of belief acquisition through socialization. This is often done by explicit reference to the beliefs that undergird the practice which gave rise to the belief. Hence, what we will need to look at is not whether we can conceive, psychologically, that beliefs would be formed directly on the basis of experience, but on the epistemological or logical ordering between knowledge gained from experience and belief. If we cannot dissociate theological beliefs from experience as Alston suggests, then this fact probably cuts against Alston with regard to their usefulness in polemical debate. If theological beliefs are in part constitutive of religious experience, then they cannot – except in a circular way – serve as a means of adjudicating a dispute with someone with different theological beliefs. Those background beliefs (theological, philosophical or what have you) that dictate which experiences count and which don't – or at least how to interpret them. Again, my point is not that nothing can be learned from experience, but rather that appeals to experience are unhelpful in cross-cultural debates because they are question-begging. Whether or not a particular belief-forming mechanism gives knowledge is still up for debate when there are claimants, in a position of

[89] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 408 (German pagination), 21 (English pagination). I take this to be a purely an epistemological point and should not be confused with the metaphysical judgment (either for or against) that God is in some sense subordinate to an external law. Kant's point is that we cannot glean moral principles in a non-circular way from examples. One must already know what goodness is, that is, one must already have the moral law in order to pick out examples of goodness.

parity with each other, who each state that their beliefs, incompatible with one another, are also knowledge.[90]

In any case, one does not completely avoid the formative input of one's other beliefs, no matter how tacit or rehearsed into oblivion they are. In fact, the more engrained they are, the more difficult it is to become aware of them. The problem remains that different societies socialize their children in various ways, each of which carry their own internal justification. So Buddhists will raise their children to understand the world one way, Christians another, and secular humanists yet another way. Alston himself puts the point quite nicely,

> It hardly requires mention that religious experience gets objectified in terms of radically different conceptual schemes in different religious traditions. The same general sort of experience that a Christian takes to be an awareness of the presence of a supreme personal deity might be taken in Hindu circles as an experienced identity of the self with a supreme undifferentiated unity. Where individuals experience God as communicating something to them, these messages will differ in ways that, generally but not invariably, correspond to the locally dominant theology.[91]

It is of course possible as well that a society so inculcate their children with rules for interpreting their experience such that they immediately understand their experience in terms of the Great Pumpkin instead of the Christian God. And societies do currently rear their children in such a way that they would understand their experience immediately in terms of Deism or naturalism etc. And what of those children who are raised that way? Wouldn't they be warranted in believing in the Christian God only by flouting their epistemic duties? By ignoring what their senses told them?

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[90] Indeed, this would bring us back around to needing something like ordinary, everyday justification to adjudicate these claims, something which externalist accounts of knowledge cannot provide.

[91] Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," 123.

If we are to find a means for stating that one system is better than another, Alston's discussion of belief forming mechanisms is ultimately unhelpful. After all, what reasons could one give a member of another community that *one's own* belief forming mechanisms are the right ones? To reach this conclusion it would require taking as a premise that one's own system has it right. And of course, this is precisely what is in question. Any argument to this affect would be therefore be viciously circular. And so, while the Reformed epistemologists have provided adequate grounds for thinking the religious believer is justified, or rationally entitled to hold the beliefs she has, their account of knowledge has thus far not provide a mechanism by which one could settle cross-cultural disputes about truth.

Does Plantinga fare any better? After Plantinga rejected the classical foundationalist criterion for properly basic belief, he rejects the argument from parity that a person or a community might hold basic belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic. Plantinga does acknowledge that a criterion for proper basicality, when formed in the inductive way he suggests, will reflect the particularities of the communities which gave rise to it and so will not be polemically useful.[92] Put another way, none – or very little at least – of what is taken as properly basic in one community may be considered properly basic to members of another community. This suggests, again, that there is a rational impasse between members of different communities. On the other hand, Plantinga does argue that people who hold belief in God in the traditional sense must believe their own belief system is superior in some sense to the Great Pumpkin. In other words, for the Christian to reject belief in the Great Pumpkin as a properly basic belief, she will have to maintain that there is some relevant difference between belief in God and belief in the Great Pumpkin. Interestingly, Plantinga doesn't think this is a difficult task.

[92] See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 78.

An easy way to see what Plantinga is up to is to consider why he thinks that theism is better, or more likely to be true, than belief in the Great Pumpkin. He thinks that, as humans, we have an innate disposition to see God's work in the world, and no such natural tendency to come to belief in the Great Pumpkin.[93] This fact about our dispositions constitutes the relevant difference between belief in God and belief in the Great Pumpkin and shows why belief systems based on the former would be superior to the latter. Belief in God can be taken as properly basic, but belief in the Great Pumpkin cannot.[94] Hence, one is right in taking belief in God to be properly basic, on the grounds of this natural tendency.

He calls this disposition to perceive God the '*sensus divinitatis.*' Plantinga writes that the *sensus divinitatis* is "a disposition or a set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity."[95] The *sensus divinitatis* is like memory and perception in that, under the appropriate circumstances, beliefs are simply *formed in us*. That is, the *sensus divinitatis* is not a faculty that provides material which we then take as premises from which we derive conclusions like "God created the starry heavens" or "God condemns my sin." Rather, belief formation occurs spontaneously, *immediately* in Plantinga's technical sense, just as I find the belief in me that I am sitting on a chair on the basis of sense perception – beliefs so formed are not *conclusions* derived from other beliefs, they are basic. Further, the *sensus divinitatis* is designed

[93] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 78.

[94] To be more precise, Plantinga thinks that belief in God is not itself properly basic. Rather, beliefs of the sort, "God has created all that I see" are properly basic as these are the beliefs that are truly immediate and produced by our natural dispositions. But they obviously entail the corollary, "God exists."

[95] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 173.

such that when it is functioning properly (i.e., free of malfunctions or other hindrances to its function) and when it is operating in its proper environment, then it produces in us *true* beliefs:

> It isn't just that the believer in God is within her epistemic rights in accepting theistic belief in the basic way. That is indeed so; more than that, however, this belief can have warrant for the person in question, warrant that is often sufficient for knowledge. The *sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs… The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions properly, it ordinarily *does* produce true beliefs about God. These beliefs therefore meet the conditions for warrant; if the beliefs produced are strong enough, then they constitute knowledge.[96]

Again, both Plantinga and Alston are arguing that, beyond mere deontic justification, religious believers have good reason to think that their beliefs are warranted, and when produced under the right circumstances, those beliefs are likely to be produce knowledge, and therefore are true.

I believe Plantinga's account is an excellent example of how one can argue the rationality and apparent truth of a system *internally*. His account is coherent and provides an excellent reason to think that one can have knowledge of God, provided that God does indeed exist (otherwise, of course, it is unlikely that theistic beliefs would have any kind of warrant and therefore the necessary conditions for knowledge would not be met). Plantinga goes even further and gives us an explanation why many individuals do not form theistic beliefs on the grounds of our natural dispositions. But while Alston suggests that, more or less, one must be trained to perceive God in the natural order and that those who have not had such training lack the resources to discern God's presence, Plantinga suggests what we might say is a more *theological* answer to why many individuals apparently do not form beliefs appropriate to the workings of

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[96] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 179.

the *sensus divinitatis* – sin. Plantinga explicitly calls attention to the fact that his remarks about sin, the regeneration of the Holy Spirit and faith, are of Reformed or Calvinist inspiration.[97] Here Plantinga is a truly *Reformed* epistemologist in the theological sense of the phrase. Those who do not have this sense in working condition are lacking something, they are deficient in some way. Due to the cognitive effects of sin, "the knowledge of God provided by the *sensus divinitatis*, prior to faith and regeneration, is both narrowed in scope and partially suppressed. Due to one cause or another, the faculty itself may be *diseased* and thus partly or wholly disabled. There is such a thing as cognitive disease; there is blindness, deafness, inability to tell right from wrong, insanity; and there are analogues of these conditions with respect to the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*."[98] True to his Reformed inspiration, Plantinga maintains that it is the instigation of the Holy Spirit, and regeneration begun by God that allows a given person to recover the full or at least partial functioning of the *sensus divinitatis*. It's not something that a person can achieve one's own – one is chosen by God for regeneration or one is not. There is nothing a person can do themselves voluntarily to activate its function.

Plantinga's way of thinking about a relevant superiority among believing communities rests on a factual claim: that the existence of a faculty that is active, *ex hypothesi*, only in *some* individuals. It seems to me that by joining his philosophical system to Reformed theology that Plantinga is once again developing a defensive position. In so doing I think he leads us to a rational impasse when comparing belief systems. Christians will have their own beliefs and the Great Pumpkin community will have theirs, but there can be no helpful deliberation between the two as to which is better. The reasons that each can give to think that their view is true are

[97] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 201.

[98] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 184.

accessible only to those already on the inside. For Christians who believe they have the full use of the *sensus divinitatis*, their discussions with members of other communities will boil down to: "Well, I simply can see the truth and you cannot." And once again, since each will be able to claim that their community of believers is justified in the deontic sense, and each will have only internal reason to think that their beliefs are true, we can get no further. Plantinga's suggestion is internally consistent with itself, it offers a picture of how the theist might actually be in a better position to access the greatest truths of the universe while others are not. And, by including the cognitive consequences of sin in his account, he gives an explanation of why there might be this disparity. But can Plantinga give us a *mechanism* by which a believer of one system could convince someone from another system of its superiority? It seems not. On the contrary, Plantinga's account subject to the same type of criticism as Alston's was. Any justification that, say, a Christian can give for thinking she is right, on the grounds provided by Plantinga will be viciously circular.

I think this kind of rational atomism is endemic to Reformed epistemology and has very undesirable consequences. Not only is it unhelpful in providing grounds for adjudicating disagreements between cultures, but it leaves us entirely without a rational underpinning for a practice common in nearly every religious tradition and daily life – proselytization. By "proselytization," or "evangelism," I mean the practice of trying to convert someone else to one's religion or point of view, broadly speaking. There is simply no sense to be made of rational conversion if reasons for believing in the truth of one's religion are only available to those who already have the relevant background beliefs. Where, for example, does this leave the sincere nonbeliever who, following a strong sense of honor and intellectual honesty, wants some good reason to become a Christian? Empirically speaking, assuming that there is such a faculty

as the *sensus divinitatis*, and since there remains disagreement in beliefs about God, it follows that the *sensus divinitatis* does not work properly in all individuals. And of course, the explanation for this might be the negative cognitive consequences of sin. But if, as Plantinga believes, the working of the *sensus divinitatis* is at the root of knowledge of God, then no one who does not already grasp the truth cannot be brought to see the truth through rational means. It appears to me, and this is true to Reformed theology, that there is no such possibility for conversion to be a rational choice. In other words, Reformed, or Calvinist philosophy, though allowing for an impregnable negative apologetics, renders extra-community *reason giving* meaningless. Even worse, if any person does lack a functioning *sensus divinitatis*, and if this is the only relevant way to discern whether belief in God is what one *ought* to believe (i.e., the only reason to believe that the proposition "God exists" is *true*), then that person is entirely incapable of perceiving God, and thus incapable of seeing belief in God as rational. A person in such a position is forced to decide between salvation at the cost of irrationality, or rationality at the cost of salvation. There is no *reason* for those outside to join the community of those on the inside – no grounds for thinking that one system is better than another.[99]

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[99] One is tempted here to label the Reformed epistemologists 'fideists' on this ground. Plantinga, however, rejects the label. See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 90. Beyond the philosophical objections I have made so far, I believe the theological consequences of tying epistemology to Reformed theology are even more dire. Plantinga's explanation of why those outside of the Christian fold can't perceive its truth, because of its reliance on Calvinist theology, really creates more problems than it solves. We can say that those that can't simply perceive that God exists and thus can't simply perceive the truth of propositions like "God exists" as properly basic beliefs, are cognitively deficient, sure. But this raises the deeper problem of how *anyone* could come upon truths in this fashion, since it is the case that all are under the curse of sin and its cognitive effects.

If one chooses to avoid this problem by appealing to the doctrine of election, that the Holy Spirit regenerates only *some*, one is jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Much of my theological objections here loosely laid out are a response to the conglomerate of Calvinist doctrines, but perhaps the most pernicious for my philosophical convictions is the doctrine of total depravity when this is coupled with the theological conviction that not all have been elected

There are problems, then, when philosophers try to make religious belief rational by grounding knowledge in religious experience because these are experiences are accessible only to those that are on the inside – to those that have the relevant background beliefs and practices. It may be true that those within a community have beliefs which meet the relevant criteria for knowledge because they are formed on the basis of reliable belief forming mechanisms, but the difficulty is that we have no *reason*, from the outside, to think this is the case. A theist may claim that their experience warrants their religious beliefs and makes them likely to be true. If the atheist objects, and says that such a belief about their experience is irrational, the theist may claim that belief in God is properly basic and thus not irrational. There is no traction here for polemical argument. Both claims to truth and rationality are relative to the community. Such a position smacks of the Reformed theological notion of divine election (or we could say that it's what we might call, in Wittgensteinian language, "private evidence") – some are chosen by God to be redeemed, others are not. Some are equipped to have knowledge of God, some are not. And really, that's all there is to say about the matter. Could this possible be the case? Yes. Can anyone give non-circular reasons to think that it is the case? No.

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and thus regenerated for this leads to the result that the human sense of good and evil is precisely nothing. On what grounds would faith in God be seen as a rational or good choice then? Not because of God's goodness, because we can't perceive that. Perhaps because not believing in God will lead to eternal suffering? But on what grounds would God be distinguished from an evil demon who made the same claim – either praise him or suffer eternally?

Further, if the doctrine of total depravity is true, and all are equally worthless, then on what grounds would God choose to elect person A over person B? Unless the choice is irrational, God would be in the position of Buridan's ass. To this it is usually objected that God's ways are *higher* than our ways, and that we should not judge God. I would respond that it seems that God's ways, if this line of reasoning is held, are decidedly *lower* than our ways. And why on earth should we not use our God given reason to discern good from evil whenever possible and attribute to God only what is good and not evil? To believe that God is so far beyond our comprehension is to make theism indiscernible from devil worship.

Plantinga does successfully rid us of the *de jure* challenge to religious belief, but there is a price to pay. The excision of the role of belief and reliance upon dispositions or faculties as the root of perceiving the truth of religious belief leaves no room for positive apologetics. There is no way for someone to ascertain the truth of the Christian or even theistic doctrines from the outside. We're left where we started, either you have the beliefs or you don't. If you don't, and Plantinga is right, then there is no way for an unbeliever to perceive the rationality or truth of religious belief. If Alston is right, it is theoretically possible that an unbeliever undergo the requisite training to have the right kinds of experience that would eventually make faith plausible, but I am at a loss to locate a rational impetus at all to undergo such a procedure. I conclude that both Alston and Plantinga's expositions, while forming an excellent defense of the rationality of the believer, and even providing good internal reason to think that the believer has access to knowledge of God, can never provide good reason for someone *outside* the community of believers to enter it. Perhaps Plantinga and Alston are not concerned by this objection – their concern may only be negative apologetics. Nevertheless, it is clear that Reformed epistemology cannot provide the grounds for successful cross-cultural deliberation. We need, then, an alternative to Reformed epistemology.

2. A Wittgensteinian Critique of Evidentialism

As we have seen, the great benefit of the evidentialist way of looking at justification is that by putting constraints on what constitutes justification, they have a situation in which cross-cultural disagreements can be adjudicated by appeals to evidence. The idea is that you must have positive reasons – evidence – for a belief in order to be justified in the sense of being permitted to hold those beliefs. There are two problems with this approach – at least in its traditional variants. First, the constraints are too narrow. It leaves many obviously justifiable beliefs in a position such that they aren't deontically justified such as memory, or the belief that the world is more than five minutes old. Second, evidentialism is self-referentially incoherent. That is, it fails its own test of justification. Hence, evidentialism has not provided a non-circular method of determining which beliefs are reasonable to hold. It appears that using Enlightenment-era evidentialist criteria to determine the rules of rationality is just to impose Modern European cultural norms on a public debate. On the other hand, while Reformed epistemology offers an impenetrable defense for the rationality of religious believers, it leaves religious believers of different stripes with no rational means to adjudicate disagreement. While evidentialism is self-referentially incoherent and circular as a mechanism for cross-cultural debates, Reformed epistemology is utterly unhelpful. It leaves religious believers in a position of inextricable parity. What we are left with, after the Reformed epistemologists' critique of evidentialism, is a pluralization of rationalities, each incommensurate with one another. With no apparent points of comparison between rationalities, there is no possibility for explicating a mechanism for successful cross-cultural deliberation.

Enlightenment thinkers have sometimes used this pluralization of reason as motivation for reviving a Modern conception of Reason. While the existence of parity between multiple rationalities implies that there is no uniform Reason, they believe they have a knock down argument against such a position. Often this argument leads to a foundationalist claim that true knowledge is accessible to any reflective human being. Hence, there is no true pluralization of Reason, only the true voice of reason on the one hand and confusion and error on the other. All that one needs to do, according to Enlightenment thinkers, is properly clarify one's thoughts. The mechanism for gaining access to true reason usually takes the form of a skeptical regress. The contention, according to these Enlightenment thinkers, is that as no other system can meet the challenge of skeptical regresses, evidentialism (or some form of foundationalism at any rate) is not in a position of parity with other systems of determining rational beliefs, but is the only real option. In other words, if one has no other means by which to respond to skeptical regresses, the only alternative to skepticism is a kind of foundationalist variant of evidentialism. I will argue in this chapter that I believe the dichotomy between foundationalism and outright skepticism to be a false one. There are other means of responding to skepticism, in particular, one may attempt to short-circuit skeptical regresses. If this method undermines skepticism, then there is no reason to return to foundationalism and evidentialism and the path will be clear for finding another means of accounting for cross-cultural deliberation.

The basic idea of skepticism, as I see it, is that one is never justified in believing much of anything at all. If this is the case, then knowledge is impossible, justification of one's beliefs being a necessary condition for knowledge. The skeptic, then, sets about undermining claims to knowledge by repeatedly attacking the justification of those beliefs (the truth of one's beliefs not being distinguishable in practice from whether or not they are justified). This method for

critique of an interlocutor's beliefs has been historically known as Agrippan skepticism. As a brand of Pyrrhonian skepticism, the intent of such an inquiry was to call the existence of knowledge into question. What distinguishes knowledge from true belief is justification. So if I propose a belief to be true, I need to give a justification for this belief. But when I offer my grounds for a belief, I am exposing myself to further questioning – i.e., what is the justification for the second belief? In other words, when a person claims something to be true, a regress of justification can be initiated: "that what is offered as confirmation of the matter proposed is itself in need of confirmation, and so on infinitely, so that not having a starting point from which we can begin to establish anything, suspension of judgement follows."[100] The skeptic will press her interlocutor into a position of justifying each of one's beliefs through successive questioning; the goal of this game is to catch her interlocutor in an epistemically unsatisfactory position (to achieve various further ends). Typically it is thought that what justifies a belief must be some other belief. The idea is that if belief *x* is the topic of discussion, the skeptic will ask, "how do you know *x*?", requiring that you justify this belief with a further belief, let's say, belief *y*. At this point, the skeptic will ask "how do you know *y*?" and so on. Thus one is engaged in a skeptical regress.

There are three potential outcomes for regresses of justification: first, the pattern of justification could go on infinitely. As people who have had a two year old know, this why-asking can go on indefinitely. The child just isn't going to be satisfied by anything that you say. Given an infinite amount of time (and an infinite amount of patience) this process of question answering could go on endlessly. And, theoretically, if every belief is based on another belief, there is no immediately obvious reason why, purely as regards the relationship between ideas,

[100] Sextus Empiricus in Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 1998), 1.166, 337.

justification could not be infinite. Many philosophers (like many parents confronted by the hyper-quizzical two year old) think that at some point, this game of question asking must come to an end. Philosophically, the reason for this is something like the following: if the process of justification is infinite, then justification *qua* justification never has a starting point, it never gets any traction. This situation is analogous to Saint Thomas' *reductio* argument against infinite causal regresses in his Second Way. The argument there is that if there is no first cause, then there are no middle causes and no final effects. In other words, if causal regresses are infinite, then there is no first cause, no middle causes, and, consequently, nothing would now exist. But clearly this isn't the case, things do exist. Likewise, many philosophers argue that if regresses of justification are infinite, then we can't now have knowledge; justification, again, being a necessary condition for knowledge. A skeptic might be okay with this, but most philosophers believe that we have knowledge, and so conclude that regresses must not be infinite.

If infinite regresses of justification aren't acceptable, then there are two other possible outcomes. First, the pattern of justification could be circular. Again, circular patterns of justification do not seem satisfactory to most philosophers for the same reason that a circular path might sometimes be unsatisfactory – one doesn't get anywhere. For example, if I someone were to ask me why I believe that God exists, I might say, "because the Bible says so." If my interlocutor asked me why I believe the Bible is reliable, I might say, "because God wrote it." And many people have the intuition that there is something fishy about this type of question-begging justification. Ultimately, circular justification gives no *further* reason to hold a belief outside of the initial belief itself – you either already hold the belief or you don't. The justification can't add anything. Likewise, circular justification adds nothing to the epistemic status of the belief itself; it just doesn't get you anywhere.

Finally, the pattern of justification could terminate at some point or another. This is generally seen as the most compelling route for dealing with a skeptic and has the historical pedigree of following in the footsteps of Descartes. The idea is that we ought not be skeptical about humans' capacity for knowledge because there are some things that we really do *know*. At some point one must appeal to foundational beliefs in order to stop the regress – beliefs which are justified in and of themselves because they are self-evident or incorrigible (or even, according to some philosophers, evident to the senses). That is, we are entitled to hold them because they are so obvious that we cannot doubt them or be mistaken about their truth. It is only beliefs that are certain that one can be said to *know* them. Other of one's beliefs are permissible because they are rooted properly, or deduced in some way from, these basic beliefs.

Evidentialism itself, when used as an oppositional strategy to religious belief, or against other theories of rationality, often employs exactly this form of epistemic skepticism, drawing out opponents' justification for their beliefs. Of course, the goal of the evidentialist is not that of the skeptic, she does not wish to destroy one's belief in the existence or attainability of knowledge in general, but rather functions as a means of testing the justification of specific beliefs – in our consideration, religious beliefs. The evidentialist, as well as the skeptic, attack purportedly justified beliefs by engaging the believer in a skeptical doubt game. So the method of the evidentialist, like that of the skeptic, is to catch one's interlocutor in a regress by demanding justification at each step. Here the mantra is: "how do you *know*?" which is a way of asking, "What is your justification for that belief?" The evidentialist is perfectly aware that skeptical regresses can be turned back upon her. The evidentialist typically is tied to foundationalism as an answer to skepticism. As we have seen in the last chapter, typically evidentialism is rooted in a kind of foundationalism. The idea is that a belief is justified if it is

basic or supported by beliefs which are either themselves basic or grounded in beliefs which are, ultimately, basic. In other words, if a belief is not basic, one must be able to give reasons for its justification – evidence – which is itself ultimately grounded in basic beliefs. It is the fact that the evidentialist is buttressed by foundationalism that she believes herself to be secure from the skeptical ramifications of regresses of justification.

Interestingly, foundationalism and skepticism share a common root: they both arise out of a desire that our beliefs be *certain*. The idea, even for a skeptic, is that if a belief could be shown to be adequately justified then one should believe it. Both the foundationalist and the skeptic seem to think that if a belief can be shown to be indubitable, or self-evident, then one should believe it; even the skeptic would cease to be a skeptic about such a belief. The difference between the two is that the foundationalist believes she has indeed found rock bottom certainty, and the skeptic perpetually doubts that there can be such a thing. Ostensibly, the bone of contention between the foundationalist and any given skeptic (who remains a skeptic) is precisely that there can be requisite justification for our beliefs. After all, the foundationalist answer, to a skeptic, is much like a parent answering the quizzical child with a "because I said so." From the perspective of the skeptic, it is a type of fiat, a show of force, and not a real answer. A skeptic, again, is a person who thinks we are not justified in believing much of anything (if anything at all). A skeptic will attack purportedly self-evident or incorrigible beliefs, or argue against the connection of the few foundational beliefs to other of one's beliefs. To put it simply, the foundationalist and the skeptic agree about the need for certainty, they only disagree about whether it can be attained.

My strategy will be to short-circuit skeptical regresses of justification, thereby undermining the seeming necessity to appeal to foundationalism to answer the skeptic. My

contention is that in desiring certainty – that is in desiring justification for beliefs that terminate in something other than the rules that make up the game – the skeptic is asking for something that simply can never be given. Ultimately, the quest for such justification ends up in mere words. In truth, there is no need to provide an epistemic response to skepticism; skepticism is, I suggest, predicated on a confusion about the rules of doubt and justification. As such it is almost a social, rather than an epistemic problem. The result is that beliefs need not be traceable back to universally accessible basic beliefs in order to be justified. Following the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, I recommend that we look at the way that justification works in practice, in actual concrete life. It will be seen that all paths of justification terminate in a floating body of agreement of background beliefs, not shared by all people, but by the relevant conversationalists; this is the only way positive reason giving can work, and the best way forward in searching for a mechanism for cross-cultural deliberation. What counts as a good reason to hold a belief will depend upon the rules of the game being played. When this is recognized, skepticism appears as it really is, a confusion about the game of justification which results in nonsense. The skeptic simply refuses to play by the rules, who refuses to permit anything which would serve as a common basis for justification. If one wishes to prescind from any possible rules for justification, then of course one will not find any possible mode of justification.

In what follows I will first argue that foundationalism is not needed to stop skeptical regresses. Foundationalism claims that skeptical regresses can only be stopped by certainty, by beliefs which are foundational, self-evident or incorrigible. Utilizing Wittgenstein, I will suggest that certainty is not what the foundationalist thinks it is. Certainty is rather a presupposition of skepticism, and is endemic in any practice of doubt or justification. It is present in any language-game. Yet, any particular belief *could* be doubted given a proper context. We do not need to

look beyond given language-games to stop skeptical regresses. Second, I will argue that skeptical regresses, especially when engaged in as a polemical tool, are a social rather than an epistemic problem. Justification ends when those engaged in the conversation are satisfied. As we share largely the same language-games in a society, this covers over the fact that the beliefs often taken as foundational are not truly self-evident or indubitable, but only appear that way because everyone in a given, homogenous group treats them as certain in their epistemic practices. Skepticism thus appears in its true light: as a refusal to play by the socially mediated rules of a given language-game. The skeptic does not wish to trust anything, so nothing is justified in their minds. However, this is not a problem for anyone but the skeptic.

2.1. The Rules of Certainty

> "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty."[101]

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein's most thorough analysis of skepticism, skeptical regresses are addressed as part of his assault on radical philosophical skepticism generally. Important for any consideration of this work is Wittgenstein's point of entry into the problem of skepticism. It is obvious from the get-go that his involvement in this particular philosophical foray was due to a deep interest in the work of his colleague G. E. Moore; in particular his two essays, *Proof of the*

[101] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (*New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1972*), 115 (all references to *On Certainty* use the aphorism number instead of page number).

External World and *A Defence of Common Sense*. In the first of these two works, Moore attempts to address the problem of idealistic skepticism about the existence of the external world. Characteristic of Moore's "common sense" philosophy, Moore sets about proving the existence of the external world by holding up his hands in a lighted room and stating, "Here is one hand, and here is another." As Moore takes physical objects to be "things to be met with in space," and as he believes he knows his premises to be true (that he has two hands), Moore believes he has offered the skeptic a proof of the existence of at least two items in the external world. Wittgenstein is quick to recognize the abject failure of Moore's proof:

> If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest. When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it cannot be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no more certain than it is itself…[102]

The argument itself fails because, as a polemic argument, it begs the question: where are Moore's hands? Is the space that they exist in truly external to his mind or only mental? Is Moore in some special position that his testimony is immune to such counterchallenges? One must already have assented to the existence of the external world for two instances of a general concept to be admitted as evidence; when that general concept is precisely what's in question, this is simply question begging. As long as the dichotomy between the two is left intact, the idealist's challenge goes unmet.

But Wittgenstein is primarily concerned that Moore has misunderstood the nature of the skeptical concern. As he fails to identify the nature of the problem that the skeptic offers, Moore fails to generate the right kind of response: "If e.g. someone says 'I don't know if there's a hand here' he might be told 'Look closer'.—This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the

[102] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 1.

language-game. Is one of its essential features."[103] As Wittgenstein points out, it is in the nature of ordinary doubt that one be able to satisfy oneself that the problem has been solved. In ordinary, everyday language-games there are obvious rules for assuaging one's doubts. But when we start doing philosophy, we enter into a new kind of game where the ordinary rules of satisfaction need not apply.[104] Whereas in a normal situation, if someone said, "I don't know if there's a hand there," the appropriate response may be, as Wittgenstein says, "look closer" or, "turn a light on," in a situation where someone is articulating philosophical doubts, the rules are different. In philosophy, much that should be left alone is problematized and thrown into question. The idea is that perhaps with philosophy there is a new, deeper type of doubt that requires answering – a "doubt behind the doubt."[105]

In this case, by virtue of the very nature of radical, philosophical skeptical doubt, there is *no thing* that could be offered to the skeptic which will assuage her doubts – no amount of philosophical proof can demonstrate the existence of the external world. Wittgenstein believes it is a misunderstanding to try to give an answer to the skeptic. You can tell the skeptic that you *know* x, y or z until you're blue in the face, but you will get nowhere. Because Moore's proof is misguided in attempting to give an argument where none can be given, his words sound hollow, like a kind of *reassurance*. One can almost hear it in the tone of his voice: "This is something that I *know*." And this, of course, does absolutely nothing for the skeptic, who is not impressed

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[103] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 3.

[104] Often Wittgenstein makes it sound like philosophy is the result of a kind of neurosis: "I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again 'I know that that's a tree', pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy'" (*On Certainty*, 467).

[105] The phrase belongs to Michael Williams, "Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism" in *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, ed. Denis McManus (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88.

by what Moore claims to know, whether justified by philosophical reasoning or by common sense. Wittgenstein's own approach is to question whether it makes sense to have doubts of a radical, philosophical kind, like that of doubting the existence of the external world:

> From its *seeming* to me—or to everyone—to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so.
>
> What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it.[106]

Wittgenstein remarks that even if everyone believes through common sense that there is an external world, this does not constitute a proof that "there is an external world" is a true proposition. Rather, the proposition evinces a number of misunderstandings. Utterly rejecting the typical positive response (i.e., giving proofs) to the skeptic as given by Descartes and Moore, Wittgenstein plans to attack the problem of skepticism by examining the way that doubt works in everyday life, and then take that understanding and applying it to radical skepticism. It is important to see that this is not already tantamount to a refutation of the skeptic. If Wittgenstein was merely to say, "in doubting one must follow the rules of ordinary doubt games, and radical, philosophical doubt does not follow those rules, therefore it is senseless" this would again be begging the question against the skeptic. Rather, Wittgenstein offers a kind of *therapeutic*, rather than a philosophical or argumentative response to the skeptic. That is, he diagnoses a kind of conceptual disorder and tries to resolve it; he does not argue with the skeptic outright. Again, he thinks that a polemical argument with the skeptic is wrongheaded and impossible to win. But he wants to show *why* it is impossible to win. Teasing out this *why* from his participatory ruminations will allow us to see that the skeptic's position, and typical responses to it, are predicated on confusions.

[106] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 2.

Wittgenstein's approach in *On Certainty* is characteristic of his convictions about the task of philosophy in general. For Wittgenstein, philosophy has no proper positive role, but instead ought to be a kind of conceptual therapy. We should not spend our time constructing arguments and building up metaphysical systems to compete with other metaphysical systems as in the realist-idealist debate. These antinomies are not resolvable. Hence, these metaphysical theories about the world – "it must be like this!" – are the source of a great deal of confusion and "mental discomfort." These confusions need to be dissolved by philosophical clarification of the terms involved. Thus, philosophy's role as therapeutic – as relieving mental discomfort – becomes apparent, as does Wittgenstein's belief that philosophy never does anything constructive. Naturally, this is not to say that philosophy does not do anything worthwhile, merely that philosophy should not concern itself with theories. The most that philosophy will do is *dis*solve problems, it does not solve them:

> How does it come about that philosophy is so complicated a structure? It surely ought to be completely simple, if it is the ultimate thing, independent of all experience, that you make it out to be.—Philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots that it unties.[107]

And, as Alan Bailey puts it, "if one succeeds in untying a knot in someone's thinking, then the end result is simply the disappearance of the knot."[108] Hence, the main task in dealing with metaphysical quandaries is to convince the interlocutors that the problem is predicated on a confusion; the metaphysician is merely misapplying grammar to reality. The problem has not

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[107] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, (*California: University of California Press, 2007*), aphorism 452.

[108] Alan Bailey, "Wittgenstein and the Interpretation of Religious Discourse," *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Robert Arrington and Mark Addis (New York: Routledge, 2001), 120.

been solved but "[o]nce the new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment."[109] As we will see, for Wittgenstein, the meaning of language is found in its use, or perhaps better, the *sense* of a word is found in its use. So to dissolve the traditional problems in philosophy Wittgenstein will set about pointing out just where language "goes on holiday"[110] or where language is "idling" and not doing any work. Thus, the radical doubts of the skeptic are ultimately not real philosophical problems according to Wittgenstein. As Michael Williams points out:

> If the scruples of the sceptic or idealist are incoherent, then so are the reassurances of the realist. No proof is possible because there is nothing to prove. This means that a response to scepticism cannot be dialectical: that is, it cannot take the form showing that the sceptic is wrong, proving what he doubts. Rather it must be diagnostic and therapeutic. It must identify the conceptual misunderstanding that gives rise to the illusion of sceptical doubt; and it must explain why the sceptic fails to see the illusion for what it is.[111]

This is precisely what Wittgenstein aims to do in *On Certainty*.

For Wittgenstein, doubting beliefs, as well as justifying beliefs, is a linguistic behavior that happens in contexts of meaningfulness and intelligibility that he calls 'language-games.' Language-games are contexts of linguistic use and behavior. As Wittgenstein himself says, "the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is

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[109] Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 48e.

[110] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Ltd., 2001), §38: "For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*."

[111] Williams, "Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism," 79.

part of an activity or of a life-form."[112] As a kind of game, there are, accordingly, rules for the use of language in various contexts. And different games will have different rules. Hence, taking a word from one context of one language-game where it is felicitously employed and moving it to another game will often cause confusion. Violating the rules will result in meaningless words. But the rules are not rules of nature, they are social rules, but usually unthematized social rules – "taken in through the pores" as it were. For example, if a friend and I are watching a baseball game and I ask, "how many touchdowns has Cliff Lee thrown this year?" my friend likely won't know what to say. What I have done is taken the words which perform perfectly well in one language-game – one context of linguistic use and behavior – and put them into one were they have no socially recognizable function. I have violated the linguistic rules of the game, and as a result, the sentence has no salient meaning to my hearer.[113]

Thus, Wittgenstein begins the process of finding the knot of confusion in the skeptic's thought by pointing to the nature of language-games themselves. Wittgenstein's goal is to stop skepticism, but without giving a polemical response by appealing to foundationalist standbys like self-evidence or incorrigibility or even Moore's "common sense." One way of thinking about what Wittgenstein is up to is that he is trying to get the skeptic to stop looking for some kind of objective justification over and above the mechanisms for justification found in everyday language-games. Just as he suggests that there is no legitimate "doubt behind the doubt," there is also no "justification behind the justification," no meaningful form of justification over and above our ordinary practices of justification. Part of his therapeutic treatment of skepticism is the suggestion that certainty is always already a part of every language-game – including the

[112] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

[113] Of course this does not prevent a meaning being assigned, as a code or an inside joke. But the meanings of words cannot be privately assigned and still be publically used.

language-game called 'doubt' – it is not something that exists, or can exist outside of a language-game. He claims that if nothing stood fast for the skeptic, she would not succeed in doubting anything: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt."[114] In other words, in order for any language-game to work – doubt and justification being two aspects of a particular kind of language-game – *something* has to stand fast. Moreover, the rules that govern such interplay are part and parcel of the relevant language-game.

For instance, it is a rule of ordinary doubt that one knows of a way to answer the doubt. If my friend and I want to go a baseball game, and she says to me, "I think that we can get two tickets for 25 dollars." I might respond, "I doubt it." But of course, we know quite well how to settle this dispute – we call the box office, or look on the internet, etc. Or if I'm in a dark room with a friend and she asks, "Did you find the book you were looking for?" I say, "I don't know, I've found *a* book." But once again, I know precisely how to go about reassuring myself that this is or is not the book I'm looking for – I take it out into the light and look at it. Again, there are times when we are not sure of something by mere touch, but then we can check it by sight or vice versa. That is, if the information from one of our five senses is in question, the only way we could assuage ourselves of our doubts is if we take the information of another of the senses as certain. Whenever doubt is involved, there must be some way of satisfying ourselves about the doubt – this is simply how the language-game of doubt operates.

For instance, how could the idealist skeptic satisfy themselves that the external world existed with Moore's proof? "My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the

[114] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 450.

sight of my hand as evidence for it."[115] If we cannot determine what could possibly satisfy our concern, and indeed, if we cannot even assign one, then we have not articulated a real doubt – the utterance is lacking a context which gives the utterance meaning. Wittgenstein writes,

> If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If it were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (Who decides *what* stands fast?) And what does it mean to say that such and such stands fast?[116]
>
> If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand, for *this* reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not.[117]

It is a feature of both doubt and justification that they are parasitic upon taking something as certain *in practice*. One must trust something to doubt something else. Even in idealism, *something* is taken as certain – the dualism image, or sense perception. In order for skeptical regresses to gain traction, some beliefs must be trusted and held exempt from doubt. Wittgenstein writes, "It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry."[118]

The most popular interpretation of passages like this in *On Certainty* is called the "framework reading." According to this view, Wittgenstein is suggesting that there are various "bedrock" certainties which we do not, and in some cases cannot seem to doubt, but which are

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[115] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 250.

[116] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 125.

[117] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 231.

[118] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 88.

themselves part and parcel of particular language-games.[119] The term "framework" is applied because these various judgments, beliefs or propositions "constitute the framework within which practices of inquiring, justifying beliefs, arguing, asking for and giving reasons, making knowledge-claims, etc., take place."[120] Insofar as these beliefs and judgments frame all of our investigations they are outside the path of inquiry, but only because they are presuppositions, or prerequisites of the game we are currently playing, so to speak. So Wittgenstein writes,

> If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.[121]
>
> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.[122]

Various beliefs are certain or lie apart from the path of inquiry for different reasons and one should be clear in each particular case *how* the game functions and thus *why* these beliefs are apart from the path of inquiry. The emphasis on the context provided by the language-game is important – what functions as part of the frame in one case may not in another: "…the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience and at another as a rule of testing."[123] At one point I may be in doubt about the health of my eyes and may test them by appealing to my sense of smell. Of course this does not mean that my sense of smell is

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[119] I employ scare quotes here intentionally because in philosophy we like to think about structures, and beliefs being "grounded" or "built upon" one another. However, we ought to be careful in applying structural foundationalist metaphors to Wittgenstein. As he remarks, "I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house" (*On Certainty*, 248). As will become increasingly obvious, Wittgenstein is no foundationalist, but instead a rather unique kind of coherentist.

[120] Williams, *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, 77.

[121] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 205.

[122] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 342.

[123] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 98.

indubitable, but it functions as being such while I'm using it this way. While I'm expressing doubts, I don't doubt the meaningfulness of my words. It's not even clear that I *could* doubt the meaningfulness of my words while I'm using them. At other times, for example, when I'm learning to speak a new language, I might doubt if my words make sense.

Some beliefs are outside the path of inquiry because they function like the hinge of a door which enables it to move. That is, some beliefs make possible the inquiry in the first place and that is why they are outside the path of inquiry:

> That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.[124]
>
> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.[125]

These certainties are for Wittgenstein neither self-evident nor indubitable in the sense of a classical foundationalist. Rather, they are held in place because they are held firm by surrounding beliefs and practices and so are not susceptible to doubt without the game ceasing to function. Skeptical regresses are a good way of *locating* such beliefs, those that are held as certain within the language-game.

Wittgenstein claims that skeptical questioning, i.e. "how do you *know*?" either "drags out the language-game, or else does away with it."[126] Dragging out the language-game is asking for justification – but it must terminate somewhere. In ordinary contexts this is perfectly reasonable. As we said above, all language-games provide their own mechanisms for inquiry and

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[124] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 341.

[125] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 343.

[126] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 370.

justification of pertinent beliefs. And these will differ from language-game to language game. Calling for these kinds of justifications is dragging out the language-game, and we can learn a great deal about the structure of the game by doing this. Within language-games, however, in order to be meaningful doubt must be *answerable* (at least in principle). There must be something which is recognized as standing fast, otherwise the doubt lacks a sense. But it doesn't follow from the fact that a certain belief is tightly knit into our other beliefs and practices, and so therefore has the status of a certainty, that it cannot be doubted at all. This is never the case.[127]

The beliefs that undergird our language-games are not exempt from doubt because they are so obviously true or because we know them in some indubitable way:

> …What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.[128]
>
> I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can *discover* them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.[129]
>
> What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions.[130]

We can think of a tennis racket as an example in this context. The reason you can't pull out a single string from a tennis racket isn't because it's invulnerable or so strong in and of itself, but

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[127] When the skeptic rejects any common way of answering this type of question, she is "doing away" with the relevant language-games. The skeptic is trying to get "outside" or "behind" the ordinary language-games that we play. She is trying to express a "doubt behind the doubt." This is truly *philosophical* doubt, eliding any possible context in which doubt and satisfaction of doubt can meaningfully be made. Of course we could invent such a game with relevant rules of justification, but that is precisely what the skeptic is not interested in. I think this is more or less what Moore is trying to do – "accept my definitions and *poof* the problem disappears!"

[128] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 114.

[129] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 152.

[130] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 225.

because it's held in place by everything else (of course not all propositions are held in such a way). These beliefs are embedded in the way we play the game, and while you're playing that game it does not make sense to doubt them. There simply aren't rules for doubt or justification of such beliefs while they are being employed. It's not clear how one would even go about doubting them. Radical doubt is not senseless because, as foundationalists want to suggest, some beliefs are properly basic and so forth justified; that some beliefs are formed in the proper way and so warranted and sufficient for us claiming to *know* that, for example, the Earth is more than 5 minutes old. But rather simply that it doesn't make sense to be skeptical about it – not because we know it's true, but because radical doubt lacks a meaningful context.

Doubt, as a means of "dragging out the language-game." is a bit like replacing a hardwood floor. If you're in the position of removing a hardwood floor, you have to stand on some of the panels in order to move the ones that need to be replaced. While you're standing in one place, you can move all of the surrounding floor, except for the pieces that you're standing on – not because that part of the floor is immovable, but simply because you're using it as the point of leverage for the force you're applying elsewhere. You can easily step onto another part of the floor and remove the part that you were just standing on. But then, quite naturally, you can't remove the piece that you're currently standing on. Radical skeptics are trying to do just that – to bootstrap knowledge as it were – and consequently skepticism effectively topples itself over in the effort. If one tries to doubt *everything* one will not get so far as doubting *anything*. Not because you *must know* something for certain, but because you can't lift the floor while you're standing on it. To use the door analogy: the hinge must stay put if the door is to turn. Hence, certainty is not something that comes from self-evidence or incorrigibility, rather it is part and parcel of every language-game. One must press somewhere to gain leverage elsewhere.

It is because only because, and only when, we engage in various language-games that some beliefs are held as certain. Imagine, for example, that a student comes into my office. I motion to a chair and say, "have a seat." What would happen if the student asked, "Can you be wrong that this chair exists?" Not while I'm offering it to my student as a seat, certainly. I'd have to back out of the concrete language-game to attain a state of mind where such a doubt is intelligible. Some beliefs are "certain" while we play language-games which presuppose them, but we might play another game which doesn't presuppose them. We can think of it this way: when one is expressing doubt in something, like that there's a hand in front of my face, one does not simultaneously doubt that one's language expressing this doubt is meaningful. Here one's language is taken as certain. But one *could* doubt the meaningfulness of one's language in a different context (if I am an American backpacking between countries in Europe and only know broken French, for example). In this way, framework beliefs are in some sense *malleable* and so we must rely on the context to determine their role. But when we make these new games of course, there will be certainties there as well – relative to any particular language-game there are always certainties.

Wittgenstein's idea is that what we claim to know with certainty is really just a function of socially shared language-games and their patterns of justification. Consequently, we must learn to be more modest with our requirements for claiming to have knowledge.

> In its language-game [the phrase 'I know'] is not presumptuous. There, it has no higher position than, simply, the human language-game. For there it has its restricted application. But as soon as I say this sentence outside its context, it appears in a false light. For then it is as if I wanted to insist that there are things that I *know*. God himself can't say anything to me about them.[131]

[131] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 554.

The claim "I know" is always relative to the rules of a given language-game: "the concept of knowing is coupled with that of the language-game."[132] Indeed, claims to knowledge only have a clear meaning when they are used within the context of a particular language-game. Again, certainty is something that is always internal to a language-game, there is no such language-game or meta-language by which we identify that which we know with absolute certainty. But neither is there a game in which everything is open to doubt. Ultimately, the skeptic is failing to recognize that justification for belief is always *internal* to a language-game. But we must be careful not to suggest that the skeptic's doubts are senseless because we *know* to be true those beliefs that the skeptic wants to doubt. For Wittgenstein, the possibility of meaningful doubt is coextensive with a context that provides meaning for it. The presumption of there being some kind of knowledge or certainty beyond the context of concrete language-games – as evinced by the way a philosopher or a skeptic often uses 'knowledge' – is itself nonsense.

It is simply a mistake to look outside of our ordinary language-games for epistemic grounding to these background beliefs and practices. Wittgenstein writes in a famous passage of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> "How am I able to obey a rule?" —if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule the way that I do.
> If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."
> (Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing.)[133]

[132] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 560.

[133] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217.

What stands fast in any language-game is determined by relevant social norms. These certainties are simply part of the rules we employ in our language-games – our day to day practices. The rules of the game are socially learned guidelines for speech and behavior. Perhaps it is easier to think of them as *forms of life*, as Wittgenstein dubbed them. They are beliefs that are imbedded in our ways of acting and behaving socially. Our language-games, or forms of life, are shared, and so the framework beliefs are always shared by communities; they are public. In this way Wittgenstein makes justification and doubt kinds of social and linguistic behavior and less of an epistemic problem and more of a social phenomena. Doubt, and correspondingly, justification, become games with rules which comprise the bounds of meaningfulness as well as fair play, so to speak. Thus, the rules for justification, for answering the question, "how do you *know*?" are set by social rules:

> "To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end."[134]
>
> "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; —but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game."[135]

Justification terminates because one reaches the end of the game. You can drag out the rules of the game in regresses, but eventually an end is reached and that's all there is. There is no further justification to give. To persist in asking for justification beyond what the rules of the game allow for is to exit the only context in which doubt and, correspondingly, justification make sense.

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[134] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 192.

[135] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 204.

What counts as justification depends on the game we're playing. I justify my beliefs about historical figures by finding a passage in a textbook, or better, a primary source. I justify my beliefs about economic policies by citing empirical data. I justify my math by showing my calculations, and so on. Regresses are stopped because one reaches the end of the appropriate chain of justification. If you doubt that my calculations are correct, we can double and triple check them. If you continue to doubt the accuracy of the answer, you need to be able to suggest what would count as an answer to your query, otherwise I won't understand what you mean by your continual doubt. Dialectical regress only stop by virtue of consensus, by agreement in belief as to what constitutes justification in the context of a particular game.[136] What we can legitimately claim we know with certainty is itself a feature of social consensus: "'I know' often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know. The other, if he is acquainted with the language-game, must be able to imagine *how* one may know something of the kind."[137] Hence, what constitutes justification is a matter of social consensus. In order for there to *be* practices of justification, some beliefs must be trusted, must be assented to as certain, for justification to gain traction. And of course that differs from topic to topic and community to community. If the Bible's being the inerrant word of God is part of our shared background beliefs, then it simply

[136] We would be grossly mistaken if we think of consensus as the result of voluntaristic choices. We do not simply choose much of what Wittgenstein means by "forms of life." Much of what is contained in the concept is a result of human beings being what we are. A small part of this is the notion that some beliefs are better than others and that we ought to give reasons why we hold one belief rather than another. There are different ways of doing this in different cultures, but all cultures have the impetus to give justifications for beliefs and behaviors. There is an "ethnographic" dimension to what Wittgenstein talks about, but this is only problematic if it is so severe as to make forms of life atomistic or isolationist. In truth, there is much more in common between forms of life than there are differences. We are all, after all, humans.

[137] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 18.

does function as the basis of adjudicating disagreement. While one is in the grip of such a deliberation, the question of whether the Bible *ought* so to function cannot arise. You cannot lift the floor you are standing on. One can, however, play that game about whether the Bible ought to function as the basis of adjudicating disagreement. That is, one can shift one's stance and take up a new issue; and different background beliefs and practices will govern that debate.

Important for our purposes is that the rules of the game, or patterns of speech and behavior, are socially shared and thus function as the point of recourse to which all participants can appeal to justify their beliefs and behavior. Justification is then refigured as a means of backing up one's beliefs in a public setting based on the shared rules of the game. The problem of skepticism thus appears in a social instead of an epistemological light. Philosophers aren't bothered by skeptics because deep down they are distressed that they cannot give a good answer to them. They are bothered by skeptics because skeptics are socially alienating. Insofar as they persist in being skeptical when the relevant methods of justification are exhausted, they are simply refusing to play by the rules of the game. This leads to confusion and the idea that we aren't justified in believing anything. This isn't so; the radical skeptic simply won't trust some beliefs and let them serve as the basis of a process of justification. Here we can begin to see why skepticism is not simply an epistemological problem, but has an irreducible social dimension:

> "My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no physical objects makes no such admission."[138]

The point of doubt is to get the thing checked out, justified. But if you will admit nothing I say as justifying the belief, if you will trust nothing, then what are we doing? Skepticism implies a radical social break with one's interlocutors. Ultimately, the skeptic has two options, she can

[138] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 23.

rejoin the rest of humanity and partake in the kinds of games that give forms of justification for the beliefs that we have, or she can depart from the only contexts where doubt and justification have any sense.

2.2. The Rules of Justification

I have argued that certainties exist within all language-games, but it is important to remember that they *only* exist within language-games. Contrary to those who engage in radical skepticism, there is no exterior to particular language-games to where we can address the "doubts behind the doubts"; there is only moving within one or another amorphous language-game. One can never get out of them altogether. Or, to put it the other way around, to get out of any given language-game is to give up the meaningfulness of doubts and correspondingly, of justifications. Both doubt and justification are part and parcel of various language-games; they cannot function *outside* of those games. What this means for our project is that traditional evidentialists – those who tie justification to foundationalism – lose their trump card. There is no need to respond to skepticism outside of pointing out their confusion and inviting them to partake in the ordinary language-games that we all play. In fact, attempting to answer them in the sense of showing that there are things that we do *know* in the foundationalist's sense, only

feeds into this confusion.[139] Traditional evidentialists believe that an appeal to foundationalism is necessary to ground beliefs and proclaim them justified, but I believe Wittgenstein has shown a way to short-circuit these kinds of skeptical regresses without appealing to foundationalism. If this argument is correct, then evidentialists must give up the idea that what undergirds the justification of beliefs and what stops regresses is something that is indubitable, something which is necessarily true and universally accessible – they must give up foundationalism. And with that goes the constraints that they wish to put on what constitutes a good reason to hold a belief.

Of course, the idea that members of varying communities count different things as a good reasons to hold a belief matches the empirical facts. For example, I have heard religious believers remark, "How can someone not believe in God? Just look outside, that's all the proof you need!" And of course this was met by resounding agreement by their companions.

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[139] In truth, if one is to give justification for any given belief, something must already be immune from doubt in order to motivate one's concern in the first place. And indeed, the skeptic does treat something as certain – the impressions that she has. In articulating radical doubt, a person is asking – couldn't it be the case that I'm so wrong about the world that although my own experiences and thoughts seem coherent, they're out of synch with the true world? That is, might there be no contact between my lived experience and the real world? "So is the hypothesis possible, that all things around us don't exist? Would not that be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations?" The skeptical challenge ought to make us wonder what would count as evidence in this case. In fact, if one persists in entertaining doubts of this kind, nothing could count as evidence that that claim is either true or false. What would count as "tallying" between one world and another. There are always constraints on error. You can't be wrong about everything. Something has to stand firm in order to perform an inquiry. Typically what stands firm for the skeptic, as Michael Williams points out, is sense perceptions. The question is always formulated as a question of how we can be certain that our perceptions "tally up" with the real world. But it must be realized that it is the separation of the world of appearances from the world behind it that gives room for skepticism. Both skepticism and foundationalism, by trying to ground knowledge in what is indubitable, force a wedge between what is "internal" (i.e. what is known for certain) and what is "external" (what is inferred). Both prioritize the "inner" and make a game of getting from the inner to the "outer." The foundationalist thinks we can, the skeptic thinks we can't. What is left unnoticed is the general picture of knowledge which the two share and which makes the game possible in the first place – the epistemic prioritization of the "inner" – i.e. the locus of knowledge – and the derivative status of the "outer." If we give up this picture of knowledge, then skepticism dissolves.

Justification for belief in God here terminated in the shared background belief that God is the manifest creator of heaven and Earth. And also quite naturally, anyone who was not already a believer or at least sympathetic to that particular religious understanding of nature would find this preposterous. The atheist will say that she has perfectly good reasons for believing that nature is not a proof of God. They may point to the existence of natural evil like cancer – such evidence flies in the face of the idea that God is the manifest and benevolent creator of the universe. Even a religious believer of different stripes might point to the brutality of nature and ask if *that* is evidence of the God that they believe in. And the theists who base their beliefs on evidence in creation may or may not have good responses to these challenges. But the point is that observation of creation is sufficient for justification of belief in God for that community because it is a background belief held in common. What we have learned from the inquiry in this chapter is that the criteria for comparing anything (including worldviews as a whole) will depend on the various forms of life – the beliefs and background practices of the people undertaking the inquiry. Any mechanism for justification is successful insofar as it performs the job required of it – that is, of settling dispute. Right to belief is settled by the rules of the relevant game and the relevant community.

Norms as regards belief ultimately depend on the people undertaking the inquiry. Hence, what constitutes a good reason for holding a belief *depends on the people having the conversation*. To say at the outset that some reasons for belief are better than others is really a form of philosophical imperialism. Admitting this does not, I submit, entail relativism. But you cannot start an inquiry by stating *ex cathedra* what will count as a good reason to hold a belief. Of course, this does not mean that "anything goes." Mature individuals are already socialized and have standards (though these differ somewhat) which govern what is acceptable given a

certain kind of inquiry (i.e., no one tries to answer the question "what is the best kind of life to live?" by physically looking under rocks). One must ask, "Where do these standards which are handed down come from? Are they part of a form of life themselves or not?" It seems obvious to me that they must be so. It's simply a kind of chauvinism to proclaim that all religious believers are irrational because they don't assent to the particular rules of justification set out by Enlightenment Europe. The reason we don't usually recognize this as chauvinism is that the rules that the traditional evidentialist plays by are taken in through the pores – foundationalism is part of our heritage, and consequently is part of our intellectual milieu. Thus, most people know how to play along and will voluntarily try to, not noticing that this is only one form of rational justification. The apparent obviousness of traditional evidentialism as a means of solving disagreements between worldviews is a silent testament to the hegemony of Enlightenment thinking in Western society. This hegemony has been confused with intuitiveness or obviousness as regards criteria for rational belief. This is borne out by the fact that often we do not debate about when it is rational to hold beliefs simply because we are already part of the same historical tradition.

The ordinary contention is that in order to say one worldview is better than another, there has to be some community transcendent criterion which adjudicates all processes of reason giving – reason must be universal and hegemonic. We can still productively compare worldview without such tight constraints upon reason. The problem seems to be that with the dismissal of traditional evidentialism we don't have any readily identifiable way of doing this. But it's important to keep in mind that we don't need something that we *know* to be certain – in the sense of a kind of certainty which has grounding outside of the language-games that we play; though of course in any inquiry, something will "stand fast" and will function as the grounds of

comparison, with regard to which we can have meaningful debates and comparison. The mistake is looking for something epistemically foundational to undergird these practices. My conviction is that we don't need the constraints upon debate that the traditional evidentialist wishes to put on these kinds of inquiries; nor do we need something transcendent of the worldviews to adjudicate between them. It by no means follows from the lack of tradition-independent means of adjudicating between worldviews that no belief systems are better than others. All that is required for comparing worldviews is present within the worldviews themselves. Therefore, I believe it is problematic to make claims of superiority for one worldview over another relative to a particular form of life only if those worldviews are conceptually isolated from one another – if there is no way to make what is rational to believe in one worldview rational in another. That is, if the beliefs and practices of cultural groups are incommensurate, that cultures are isolated, atomistic and have nothing in common with one another. Is there any reason to think that this is the case? Some philosophers think that there is, and we will take up a major motivation for this view in the following chapter.

3. *Contra* Relativism: Davidson on Conceptual Schemes

In the last chapter I have offered a critique of the kind of skepticism used to motivate foundationalism, which serves as the epistemic underpinning to traditional evidentialism. The kinds of polemical skeptical regresses that the skeptic, and to an extent, the traditional

evidentialist, engage in are a product of thinking that beliefs are only justified if they are grounded in beliefs that one could not be wrong about and which are universal. However, this is mistaken. It is often covered over because large swaths of society have the same epistemic practices, and therefore trust and treat as fundamental, a large segment of shared beliefs. In deliberative argument, regresses are stopped, *not* by an appeal to what is indubitable in itself (probably no belief has this status), but only when the regress touches a belief that the relevant conversants find acceptable, trust, or take as certain. The difficulty is that the person who makes the challenge to the religious believer and the religious believer herself, may accept different beliefs as foundational (at least for the moment) in the argument. This isn't immediately an *epistemic* problem, but a social one. Hence, the function of foundationalism as stemming the tide of skepticism and serving as a basis for evidentialism which in turn gives rules for justification in cross-cultural deliberation, is predicated on a confusion about the way that justification works. It's a social practice. We still have the problem of what to do when members of different cultures deliberate. They often will treat different beliefs as fundamental or foundational in a given context. If this is so, the two parties will speak past one another. A Christian might appeal to the Bible or to the experience of God, and an atheist would not accept these as justifications of any religious belief. What should we do about the problem of adjudicating such disagreements?

We saw in Chapter 1 that experience cannot play this role. Our beliefs do not sit outside of our experiences, but are constitutive of them. This would explain why, for example, members of different cultures interpret the world in very different ways. Two individual people can experience the same exact sense perceptions and come away with completely different interpretations of what they experienced. A charismatic Christian and a naturalist may both

witness a person who according to all medical wisdom should have died of cancer. When the person unexpectedly recovers, the first may well claim her friend's recovery was the result of divine intervention and cite it to the naturalist as a justification for her own religious conviction that God exists. The naturalist, perhaps himself a friend of the cancer patient, will likely understand the events in a different light, claiming that extreme improbability does not constitute a miracle. The best explanation for him is one without reference to the supernatural.

And examples such as these can be easily multiplied. The idea is that our background cultural beliefs or concepts penetrate even our sensory experiences and so, in a way, determine what we can learn from experience. It is impossible that one step outside of one's skin – shed one's philosophical beliefs – and encounter "the world" without them. Our experiences are shot through, even in the act of perception, with our beliefs. No amount of sense evidence is going to convince someone who does not think supernatural miracles are possible that she has seen one. She will be more likely to doubt the testimony of her senses.

Accordingly, we must look elsewhere for a mechanism to account for successful cross-cultural deliberation. It has long been suggested that there must be something outside of each culture's worldview which is neutral to which we can appeal to adjudicate disagreements between belief systems. The idea is that only something neutral between belief systems can serve as a means of commensurating two competing systems. To put it the other way around, if the idiosyncratic concepts of a particular worldview structure the believer's world from top to bottom, then there will be no productive way of comparing two (or more) competing worldviews. One has to take up a position of neutrality to make such comparisons. Typically this way of thinking is cashed out by making something like "reality," "the world," or "facts" as a neutral point of contact between all belief systems. "The world" is thought of as mind-

independent, so it "is what it is" independent of what believers think about it. Likewise, "facts" play a similar role. It is this external world which the claims of each culture are predicated *of*. When religious people say, "God exists," they are making a claim about reality. However, what makes this belief true or false has nothing to do with the believer him or herself, but with "reality" or "the world." This has often been called "the correspondence theory of truth."[140] A belief is true if it mirrors or accurately captures the world, and it is false if it fails to do this. Alternatively, we might say that a belief is true if it "matches the facts." Here "fact" stands in for "world" or "reality" as the truthmaker for a given proposition.

Why is this relevant? Well, the idea is that one can compare belief systems and therefore adjudicating cross-cultural deliberations by comparing the belief system with "the facts." Whichever system better accounts for the facts, or better mirrors them, is the true one. The mutually exclusive competitors are therefore inferior. The system which is "true to the facts" is therefore the rational choice for belief! Again, this may seem to be exactly what we want. However, while this method of comparing belief systems is theoretically very clean cut, almost immediately we run into difficulties: how does it work *in practice*? How, in other words, can we tell which system is "true to the facts" or which matches "the world" and which does not? To put it another way, How can we know when we've accessed this fundamental, neutral point of contact between systems? How do we know when we've isolated a "fact" and not just another belief?

The story is well known in the history of philosophy. Access to "the world" is not immediate. We can be deceived by appearances and so on; thus, we can never tell when our

[140] Though I have also heard it called "the dumbbell theory of truth" due to its dualistic structure – two realms, beliefs and "the world" which must be appropriately related – and its naivety.

beliefs are actually true knowledge and when they are not. Foundationalists postulated that to bridge the gap between mind and world, we needed access to something absolutely certain, something we had immediate access to. These epistemological intermediaries – whether sensation, *qualia*, appearances or other forms of "content" – were supposed to serve as evidence for the truth of one's beliefs. While what makes a belief true is the world itself, the evidence for the truth of the belief isn't the belief itself, or the world itself, but something in between. One can be deceived about the world, yes, but one cannot be deceived about the way the world *appears* to one, philosophers reasoned. The content of sensation, for example, is incorrigible. However, far from solving the problem, this only exacerbated it.

The failure of epistemic intermediaries as a criterion for when one had a grasp on "reality" was made well known by Donald Davidson. Indeed, the problem with thinking of any kind of dualism between a subjective realm (whether it be the phenomenal world or linguistically mediated reality) and an independent objective world outside of our beliefs is that "every attempt to establish a connecting bridge between subjectivity and objectivity fails, indeed must fail, because the specification of the linking medium as tying (or leading) into the subjective immediately erects a barrier to the objective. Everything we can compare our subjective notions with is, in virtue of being comparable, itself something subjective and hence no longer serviceable for establishing a real comparison."[141] We cannot get outside of ourselves to examine the relation between epistemic intermediaries and the world. Hence, the reason for avoiding epistemic intermediaries is obvious – we can never be clear about the reliability of the transmission through it:

[141] William Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 51, no. 2. (June 1991): 348.

> No such confrontation makes sense, for of course we can't get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware. Introducing intermediate steps or entities into the causal chain, like sensations or observations, serves only to make the epistemological problem more obvious. For if the intermediaries are merely causes, they don't justify the beliefs they cause, while if they deliver information, they may be lying. Since we can't swear our intermediaries to truthfulness, we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world. Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries.[142]

So truly, every attempt to link up a subjective world of mind with an objective "reality" one ends in only exacerbating the problem. And this is true whether the intermediaries which link us up with the world are "sense data" or "*qualia*" or what have you.

On the other hand, of course, if there is no way to bridge mind and world, then "the world," "facts" and "reality" all become useless for us. We can get at this point by examining the suggestion that only "facts" should count as justification in a dispute between people who have different beliefs. What do they mean by "facts"? There are two things people can mean by that word – either it means, "how the world is independent of what we think about it" (i.e., the Earth is a sphere and was even when people thought it was flat). Or it means "something that everyone agrees on." If it's the first, this can't justify anyone's belief because it's independent of our knowledge, by definition. In other words, we can never tell if we've actually accessed the facts, or only think that we have. If it's the second, then people disagree about the facts, so again, this can't count as a kind of justification either. In other words, if we have no access to them in an unmediated way, that is, without all of our concepts and beliefs, then employment of a "neutral" world is either question-begging or vacuous. There is no practical value in thinking about something which, by definition, is outside of our ability to access. As we will see, instead

[142] Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in *The Essential Davidson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 230.

of positing a new and better way to link the opposing spheres of mind and world, Davidson argues that we should give up this kind of dualism altogether and stop thinking about how we can epistemologically link the two sides. In doing so one gives up the attempt of drawing and clear lines between beliefs and facts, theory and "world."

However, failure to find a means of productively comparing worldviews by reference to a belief-independent reality might mean that our beliefs structure our reality all the way down. If this is so, then we are left with a very pernicious form of relativism. "The world" itself is different for members of different communities. If this is so, then there really is no comparing worldviews. Readers who are familiar with the philosophy of science will recognize a strong analogy between our problem and that raised (albeit inadvertently) by Thomas S. Kuhn in his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. For Kuhn, the world is uniquely constituted by one's paradigm; 'paradigm' functions here in a roughly analogous fashion to how I've been using 'worldview' – a system of background beliefs, theories and practices. A paradigm shift is a revolution in which one scientific worldview replaces another. The way that a scientist views nature is necessarily affected both by what he actually sees, and also by what he has been taught to see. This concept can be related to the empirical content-theory distinction. Scientists have been taught by a paradigm to see nature in a certain way; this is their theoretical structure. The scientists' objects of study, then, are in part constituted by the theoretical language of the paradigm: "Consider, for example, the men who called Copernicus mad because he proclaimed that the earth moved. They were not either just wrong or quite wrong. Part of what they meant by 'earth' was fixed position. Their earth, at least, could not be moved. Correspondingly, Copernicus' innovation was not simply to move the earth. Rather, it was a

whole new way of regarding the problems of physics and astronomy, on that necessarily changed the meaning of both 'earth' and 'motion'."[143]

Kuhn argues that the problem here is not merely one of clarifying one's terms, rather, theory has infected even the very way that one encounters the world: "[those in differing paradigms] cannot… resort to a neutral language which both use in the same way and which is adequate to the statement of both their theories or even both these theories' empirical consequences. Part of the difference is prior to the application of the languages in which it is nevertheless reflected."[144] In this way, a change of paradigms can be seen as a gestalt switch that must be grasped as a whole. The implication is that there are no neutral places between theoretical structures in science. Nor is there any possible reference to "the given," if one means by this perceptual data that is in no way structured by one's beliefs. Because the theoretical structure determines the way the scientists use their perceptual tools, there is no external arbiter of competing paradigms. All of experience is shot through with one's beliefs. Two scientists of differing paradigms, while observing the same data, are seeing two separate things. While looking at a bob hanging from a chain, a Galilean will see a pendulum; an Aristotelian will see a falling stone. Thus, the more modern idea of a pendulum was a gestalt switch type of shift between the previous falling stone and the new idea of a pendulum. Or, as Kuhn puts it, "though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world."[145]

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[143] Thomas S. Kuhn, *On the Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 149–150.

[144] Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 201.

[145] Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 121.

Because the world is not reducible to bare empirical facts, competing paradigms are doomed to speak past one another when discussing nature. This is because they are not speaking about the same thing; the two experiences are incommensurate. While one school speaks of "constrained falls" the other speaks of "pendulums" and there is no exterior, theory independent way to describe what they are seeing. Looking at the same bob and chain, the scientist who sees a "constrained fall" and then grasps the notion of a pendulum no longer sees the same thing. A pendulum has different properties and behaves in certain ways that a constrained fall does not. The scientist, after a paradigm shift is looking at a transformed object. However, both paradigms could hypothetically perform equally well in explaining how the bob and chain behave. *Who is to say which is right*?

As we have seen, bare sense data can give us no help because it is always already shot through with the beliefs of the perceiver. Hence, "Two men who perceive the same situation differently but nevertheless employ the same vocabulary in its discussion must be using words differently. They speak, that is, from what I have called incommensurable viewpoints. How can they even hope to talk together much less to be persuasive[?]"[146] Of course, Kuhn himself tried to maintain a notion of progress in part by pointing out that subsequent paradigms would answer the questions that led to crises in the previous paradigm. But regardless of Kuhn's own intentions, his writings – and in particular the idea that scientists work in "different worlds" – has lead to a relativistic understanding of scientific paradigms in which justification for belief is internal and importantly, isolated, within each paradigm. Without any external measuring stick by which to compare paradigms, then it might be as Paul Feyerabend famously claimed, "anything goes." Incommensurability entails relativism.

[146] Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 200.

One might note that without being able to separate one's concepts from what "the world" provides, one is in a structurally similar position to what Plantinga and Alston ended up with – that one is wise to "sit tight" with what one already believes. The work of the Reformed epistemologists leads to a position, as we have noted, of defensive impregnability; however, ultimately it is not acceptable because it does not provide the philosophical underpinnings for non-circular reasons to think that one worldview is better than another. Two people from different worldviews simply "live in different worlds" and any attempt of one to convince the other of the truth of their own viewpoint will result in the two talking past one another. No one from outside one's own worldview can mount any kind of substantial offensive against one's own beliefs. Moreover, in the absence of neutral facts to which the participants of a diverse conversation can appeal, it seems not only that any mechanism for comparison will be devoid of rational import but that the very idea of comparing is unintelligible. What sense is there in evaluating what one does not understand? Thus, in the eyes of many philosophers, the absence of neutral facts is thought to spell death to legitimate claims to justified belief, truth and knowledge. They think that if and only if we have the ability to step outside of our particular conceptualization of the world can we engage one another rationally. For our purposes, perhaps the most reasonable way of proceeding is to say that each culture's claims are "true in their own way" or something of the sort. Indeed, if worldviews are really atomized in this way – with nothing by which they can be compared – this kind of "anything goes" relativism seems unavoidable.

The current chapter argues that not being able to get outside of our beliefs and concepts in order to compare worldviews does not entail relativism. In fact, it is not even practically helpful to talk as if we *could* get outside of our beliefs and face "reality" in an unmediated way.

Both sides in a debate may claim that *they* are the ones who have truly accomplished this feat – where does it get us? But the admission that we cannot meaningfully distinguish between what we're adding to our own experience and knowledge and what the world adds may seem at first blush to exacerbate rather than solve the problem of relativism. So far from having a means of comparing worldviews, we have now trapped individuals within their own cultural beliefs and concepts. But this is not the case. After all, what sense does it make to talk of being "trapped" within a worldview if we cannot find (and indeed, cannot make sense of) the line between "inside" and "outside"? Hence, I will argue that insofar as worldviews can be intertranslated it is in fact possible – at least in principle – to compare them. The practice of comparing is not inextricably linked with there being a neutral, common set of facts or data to which a person can appeal – it is predicated only on there being beliefs or concepts that can be mapped from culture to culture. Hence, I will argue that if we can't present a plausible reason for thinking that there are a multiplicity of radically different cultural conceptual apparatuses – what Davidson calls "conceptual schemes" – then any kind of substantial incommensurability among them disappears, as does the charge of relativism. In the words of Davidson, "Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own."[147] Or, to put it another way, it is not the case that we can distinguish between other societies having different concepts and there simply being a disagreement about beliefs, opinions or matters of fact. In fact, if one is engaged in conversation with a person from another community, one can always understand apparently conceptual differences as resulting from differences in beliefs about matters of fact. And those kinds of differences *can* (at least in principle) be adjudicated.

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[147] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *The Essential Davidson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 207.

First, drawing on Davidson's essay *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* I will argue that there is no sense to be made of the claim that there are a plurality distinct conceptual schemes; we could never recognize a conceptual scheme that couldn't be translated into our own. As we will see, any evidence that a member of another culture has an alien conceptual scheme is also evidence of that agent not having the practice under consideration at all. Then, I will argue that if there can be no radical conceptual differences between worldviews, then worldviews can be, at least in principle, compared. The possibility of a neutral something between worldviews which made the idea of comparing them objectively is also the only thing which makes it possible to intelligibly differentiate conceptual schemes. If we get rid of the idea of a neutral something which different systems have different "takes" on, then relativism falls by the wayside. Hence, Davidson's argument gives us grounds to reject conceptual relativism and the inability to compare worldviews that comes along with it. Differences between conceptual schemes become intelligible simply as differences in belief about matters of fact. And this is not problematic.

3.1 Worlds Apart or Words Apart?

In his essay, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, Davidson discusses the popular, but philosophically problematic idea that our interaction with the world is mediated by

conceptual schemes.[148] Conceptual schemes are categories or other ways of organizing experience,[149] whether they be Kuhnian scientific paradigms, religious worldviews, forms of life or what have you. The idea, as Whorf puts it, is that

> …language produces an organization of experience. We are inclined to think of language simply as a technique of expression, and not to realize that language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order… We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.[150]

Again, the idea is that if individuals cannot get outside of their own culturally mediated way of understanding the world, if individuals do not have access to "the facts themselves" then we are stuck within our own conceptual scheme. As I have suggested, the principal consequence of a plurality of conceptual schemes, and the primary charge I am attempting to guard against, is a kind of relativism. If reality is truly filtered through a substantial conceptual intermediary, then "[r]eality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another."[151] Indeed, if reality is relative to a scheme, and there is no way to adjudicate or translate between conceptual schemes, then Feyerabend is right that "anything goes." No one would have the right or the capacity to formulate a meaningful critique of anyone who operates with a different conceptual scheme. As a result, no one would be able to compare worldviews in a meaningful

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[148] Throughout the course of this paper, I will use 'worldview' and 'conceptual scheme' interchangeably.

[149] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 196.

[150] Davidson citing Whorf in "Conceptual Scheme," 201.

[151] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 196.

way. All worldviews would be incommensurate with one another – that is, there is no possible common standard by which to measure one against another.

Davidson takes as his starting point the notion that language is associated with conceptual schemes: when conceptual schemes differ, languages inevitably do. However, the relationship is not reciprocal – one conceptual scheme may house several languages. The litmus test for deciding whether multiple languages share the same conceptual scheme is whether or not the languages are intertranslatable: "Studying the criteria of translation is therefore a way of focusing on criteria of identity for conceptual schemes."[152] So, for Davidson, if languages cannot be intertranslated, this can be taken as evidence that they do not share the same conceptual scheme; if they can be intertranslated, then they do share the same conceptual scheme. If two conceptual schemes are truly isolated and incommensurable, then we cannot possibly translate between the languages employed in each. Conversely, if we *can* translate between the languages of two conceptual schemes, then they are in fact not different.[153]

[152] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 197.

[153] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 197. There may be some significant differences between Davidson and Wittgenstein here. Davidson dismisses the Wittgensteinian notion that nothing could count as evidence of untranslatability without also being evidence that what we're looking at isn't *language*. Davidson doesn't like this idea because it takes translatability into a familiar tongue as a criterion of languagehood. This, he believes, isn't self evident and should be the *conclusion* of an argument. However, it's not clear to me that a) the argument I'll give on Wittgenstein's behalf isn't enough of an argument to warrant this conclusion, and b) that Davidson isn't talking past Wittgenstein as Wittgenstein seems to blend behavior with language. If we couldn't recognize something as language (as in, translatable to our familiar tongue at least in principle), then what do we mean by calling it *language?* is the natural Wittgensteinian question. Ultimately I don't think Davidson would disagree.

Accordingly, Davidson sets as his task exploring "the considerations that set the limits to conceptual contrast."[154]

Davidson questions the intelligibility of the idea of there being a plurality of conceptual schemes. How might one go about delineating conceptual schemes from one another? Perhaps the most popular metaphor for talking about radical differences in conceptual schemes is to claim that there are different points of view on a common but independent reality, yielding different and irreconcilable interpretations of this common content. So Christians may have one linguistically mediated way of understanding the world, Muslims may have another, Buddhists may have a third. But notice that in order to make sense of this form of relativism it is necessary that there *be* some reality existing independently of our language; without it, it is hard to see how we could make sense of the claim that there is a *multiplicity* of distinct conceptual schemes: "Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability."[155] But instead of arguing that we do, in some fashion, have some ability to get outside of our concepts and meet the world outside of our concepts, Davidson makes a transcendental move and suggests that if our concepts entirely determine our ability to interact with the world, then we lose the use of an independent reality as a means for delineating conceptual schemes. Indeed, this metaphor smuggles in an independent reality that, *ex hypothesi*, we can have no unmediated access to. If our interaction with reality is conceptual "all the way down," then we cannot appeal to "the world" in order to discern if someone else has a different take on it. "Different take" is here without content, or is at least indistinguishable from

[154] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 197.

[155] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 197.

having different beliefs. Hence, ultimately no independent reality can serve as the ground for distinguishing between two radically different conceptual schemes.[156]

Another way of motivating the claim that there are a plurality of conceptual schemes is that language carves up experience in quite different ways – we can imagine a color blind society that does not recognize a clean distinction between red and green, let's say. However, in order to recognize this difference, we would have to share a great deal in common with the alien speakers in the first place: "We can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for a background of generally successful translation provides what is needed to make the failures intelligible."[157] If we apply the metaphor of organization to experience, Davidson tells us that similar problems recur: "The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever plurality we take experience to consist in – events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe – we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organizes *such* entities must be a language very like our own."[158] In fact, as the languages would be so similar to one another, we might question the meaningfulness of calling them different languages. And indeed, as we need, in order to identify distinct conceptual schemes, a "criterion of languagehood that [does] not depend on, or entail, translatability into a familiar idiom", the metaphor of organizing a neutral subject matter offers us no help.[159]

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[156] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 205.

[157] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 203.

[158] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 203.

[159] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 203.

Davidson asks if the metaphor of a conceptual scheme 'fitting' reality or experience would fare much better. The idea here is that the totality of our sentences, in other words, our theories, have to confront the world and then we can perhaps distinguish conceptual schemes by how successfully they cope with experience. However, the problem with the notion of comparing conceptual schemes by thinking of them as "fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, [is that it] adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true."[160] That is, thinking of conceptual schemes as fitting the world adds no new material by which to distinguish between conceptual schemes other than to think of them variously as true or false. Once again, an apparent conceptual distinction resolves into differences of belief about what is true. But this is not problematic at all.

Davidson concludes that "[o]ur attempt to characterize languages or conceptual schemes in terms of the notion of fitting some entity has come down, then, to the simple thought that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme or theory if it is true."[161] He continues,

> Neither a fixed stock of meanings, nor a theory-neutral reality, can provide, then, a ground for comparison of conceptual schemes. It would be a mistake to look further for such a ground if by that we mean something conceived as common to incommensurable schemes. In abandoning this search, we abandon the attempt to make sense of the metaphor of a single space within which each scheme has a position and provides a point of view.[162]

It does seem that any talk about a plurality of conceptual schemes smuggles in, minimally, something like a container metaphor where the two are separate and distinct but still in some sense coordinate. But this cuts the suggestion that there is a real incommensurability off at the

[160] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 205.

[161] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 205.

[162] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 205.

knees. Indeed, the idea that worldviews are distinct and incommensurate is not even intelligible without envisaging some coordinating apparatus. Oddly enough, it turns out that anything which provides the grounds for maintaining the distinction between conceptual schemes also provides the possibility of translation between them and thus undermines the claim for plurality. We must agree then with Davidson and conclude that we are unable to make intelligible the claim that there is a plurality of distinct conceptual schemes.

Note, however, that Davidson is *not* a conceptual or linguistic monist – that is, as maintaining that there is precisely *one* conceptual scheme that all human beings have. We could say that conceptual monism would be something analogous to Kantian categories which are universal for all human cognition. Insofar as experience is constituted by the faculty of intuition, it is necessarily identical for all human beings. Thus the question, "is the noumenal realm (or 'the given') one or many?" is meaningless, or at least unanswerable, as it assumes that one could take up a position outside of the categories which make human cognition possible. The answer to that question cannot be 'one' or 'many' but merely to point out the confusion in the question.[163]

I would say that likewise, to ask whether there is one conceptual scheme or many is a question which borders on the meaningless insofar as it assumes that we could step outside of any possible conceptual scheme and number them. Any kind of comparison of difference assumes an underlying framework which represents a preponderance of categorical or conceptual

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[163] Of course, in Kant's system there is something of a category mistake to ask theoretical reason to apply number to that which transcends the faculty of intuition and therefore the domain of the categories. It is only once the given has been organized by the categories that the question of number is legitimate. So to speak of number *outside* of what has been filtered through the categories is meaningless. Insofar as one speaks of number, one is (in this case, illegitimately) employing the categories.

sameness. Insofar as one can say conceptual schemes are different, one is simultaneously demonstrating that they are largely the same. As Davidson points out, to maintain that there is only one conceptual scheme is to imply that there could be others: "Even those thinkers who are certain there is only one conceptual scheme are in the sway of the scheme concept; even monotheists have religion. And when someone sets out to describe 'our conceptual scheme', his homey task assumes, if we take him literally, that there might be rival systems."[164] And later,

> It would be wrong to summarize by saying we have shown how communication is possible between people who have different schemes, a way that works without need of what there cannot be, namely a neutral ground, or a common co-ordinate system. For we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different. It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind – all speakers of language, at least – share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one.[165]

Here Davidson is pointing to the confusion in the question: insofar as conceptual schemes can be compared with one another, or even further, insofar as they can be identified *as* conceptual schemes, we have already brought what was "alien" into our own ken. We could never identify something that would count as a counterexample – as soon as we *have* identified a counterexample it ceases to *be* a true counterexample.[166] Thus, to assert the plurality of conceptual schemes which have different perspectives on the world is misguided. Indeed, Davidson thinks we ought to not talk about conceptual schemes at all.

[164] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 196.

[165] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 208.

[166] In this sense I suppose Davidson's claim is transcendental. There is no possibility of its being empirically falsified.

Responses to Davidson's argument against the possibility of conceiving different conceptual schemes are varied and often quite visceral. The most pointed riposte to Davidson's argument – famously made by Richard Rorty – is something like the following: "Okay, I'll buy your argument if you mean simply 'anything we can understand, we can understand' – but notice the indexical '*we*.' Perhaps we just aren't being imaginative enough to envision radically different conceptual or cognitive structures. It is possible that we are just stuck in our own idiosyncratic linguistically constructed way of understanding the world – there could be others." This objection amounts to a challenging of our ability to detect conceptual schemes which are radically different from our own; perhaps we just haven't been imaginative enough up until this point to envision what a total translation failure would look like. Remember that the imputation of relativism as a result of there being different criteria of justification will only stick, under Davidson's argument, if there is a total translation failure between members of different language communities. Otherwise, it is always open to us to interpret apparent differences in conceptual schemes as being simply differences of belief about matters of fact.

Well, what *could* a total translation failure[167] look like? A possible example of such a breakdown might be gleaned from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein muses, "If a lion could talk we could not understand him."[168] One way of interpreting this aphorism is that animals have a radically different form of life and therefore evince some kind of untranslatable language. Forms of life encapsulate differing

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[167] Davidson considers a "complete failure" of translatability if there is no significant range of sentences that can be translated from one language to another, and a "partial failure" if some sentences can be translated and others not. Cf. Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 198.

[168] *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 190. Of course we could also talk about aliens, angels etc. – I prefer this example because it comes from a famous and notoriously divisive passage in Wittgenstein.

beliefs, practices, values and the like. Lions, having quite different concerns than humans would perhaps have words which manifest these concerns in a way which are not detectable to humans. Following Wittgenstein's dictum "Don't think, look!"[169] I suggest that we should imagine what this scenario would look like. Now what would a lion talk about? Would it say, "I wish I had some sausage for breakfast, I'm tired of these darn gazelles!" or "Man, it's hot out here!" Would a lion talk about its surroundings? These concerns aren't very different than human concerns. In fact, there are intelligible constraints on what lions would be concerned with by virtue of their being biological beings living in a physical world. The only difficulty would be synching up the noises that a lion makes with our own language. The difference between this task and what anthropologists do daily is only a matter of degree, it's not a difference in kind.

When readers interpret "If a lion could talk we could not understand him " in a relativistic way, they do not take Wittgenstein to be making the claim that lions speak a language, like French, only we haven't found the Rosetta stone to help us translate. If that is what he meant, then there is really no conceptual difficulty between Davidson's position and Wittgenstein's. Of course it is possible that we should find some new species of lions that do in fact speak a language. They could even speak English. But this is not what the conceptual relativist is suggesting – we can readily call that a language. It may also be the case that we do translate the language of some animals at some point – there may be some species that we find that we realize gives signals to its pack mates when predators or food are near. We could, I think, take this to be a rudimentary language, made perhaps of signals or signs that elicit appropriate behavior. But

[169] *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

this would not constitute a “language of their own”; it would, again, be a difference of degree, not of kind.[170]

We could imagine, I suppose, that lions have the cognitive capacity to see things that we don’t and that this does make their concerns wildly different than our own. Perhaps they see angels and elves running around when we cannot. The idea would then be that no matter how long we spend studying their language, we would not be able to parse out their language in terms of our own. But I do not think that is true – we could, in principle, detect such language. We could compare the words we were able to translate – ‘tree,’ ‘gazelle,’ etc. with those that we could not and hypothesize that they have different cognitive faculties than us. In fact, we may, after laborious research, conversation with and interpretation of this species, come to the conclusion that they are referring to entities that we cannot see. But we’d be able to determine this on the basis that they are more or less intelligible about everything else. If our interpretation rendered these individuals as radically off base about everything, then our first idea ought to be that our interpretation manual is wrong. Small differences between conceptual schemes can only appear against a backdrop of a preponderance of similar beliefs. In fact, this hypothesis would not constitute a total translation failure either.

Perhaps the suggestion is that the lion *only* talks about those entities which we cannot perceive. In this case, the lion’s language would be wholly untranslatable, a mystery to us permanently. In fact, the lion’s language would just sound to our ears like guttural roaring noises. And after all, this is what we do find! So perhaps lions *do* have a language and our

[170] To take another example: If a squirrel were to have a language, it seems like we should be able to understand it. If language is to be something other than mere noise, it must be about something. Languages involve reference, communication and the like. It stands to reason that we should recognize the rule for referring to ‘nut’ if nothing else! It seems reasonable to say that squirrels do not have a language – at least, nothing we should call a language.

inability to understand them is evidence that it's untranslatable. But notice that this supposed evidence for an untranslatable language is identical to the evidence that the lions don't have language at all. Why on earth should we suppose that lions have an untranslatable language rather than no language at all? What value or purpose – what *use* – is there in suggesting that beings have a language when we have no reason to think they do? We might as well say that stones sing and that invisible beavers follow humans everywhere they go. I suggest that there is nothing of value in insisting on calling lions' intermittent guttural noises a language.

Moreover, there would *have* to be some commonality to even make the word "language" intelligible for use in this particular context. That language would still have syntax, words, reference and the like. The fact that we don't have the cognitive equipment to detect the entities that the lion talks about is a pure contingency. If we invent proper equipment, then we could translate the lion's language. Thus, I'm not sure that this is what the conceptual relativist is suggesting either. What is the idea that the relativist is trying to suggest – that we could properly call something a language which we can't parse out in our own language? That there are possible languages that don't employ what we calls signs, referents, words and the like? Indeed, the relativist might believe that a foreign conceptual scheme can't be analyzed in terms of our linguistic concepts. But is that intelligible? I confess that a "language" that we can't possibly parse out in our own syntactical and semantic structures, succeeds in conveying precisely nothing to my mind. For what is the content of the word "language" in this instance?[171] What

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[171] Of course, the use of language is malleable and if we decide to mean something other than using referents, words etc. by 'language', that's fine; we can make that rule change as a group. But then we have to be clear about what the new claim is. We would have to establish public rules which set the boundaries for the application of the new use of the word 'language.' But the point is, once we have changed the rules for the use of the word, then we have changed our claim after all. The argument is no longer that squirrels use language as humans do, but that they have whatever we have newly agreed upon (whatever that is). And this may be true or not, depending

work is that word doing? To the relativist, this may seem like I am "digging in my heels" and insisting on my token use of 'talking' or 'language.' I don't consider this response as problematic as philosophers like Rorty do. Why shouldn't we insist on our publicly shared tokens? What others do we have to insist on? Of course, with Wittgenstein, we could invent new shared rules and use 'talking' and 'language' some other way. But this takes the teeth out of the relativist's bite – why should the malleability of language be problematic?

If there is to be a true difference of kind, then they must mean something like "lions, even if we *could* find a translating machine to help us discover it, have a consistent, coherent language that *ex hypothesi* could *never* be translated. The translating machine that would enable us to understand their language as another coherent whole could, in principle, never be created." This is exactly the idea that there could be a radically different conceptual scheme with a coherent interpretation of the world that is not the one that we are currently employing. If someone persists in saying that lions talk, and by that they don't mean something that involves what human language involves or even *resembles* it in any way, then either their claim needs to be clarified as to what, precisely, they mean by 'language,' or we must acknowledge that our interlocutor's words are merely "idling" or "on holiday" as it's not doing any meaningful work in communicating to other human beings. There is *no use* in hypothesizing the existence of something which is, *in principle*, unintelligible to us.

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on what the words now mean. However, let's not deceive ourselves about what our claim is – it's not what we began talking about, it's *something else*.

I conclude that there is no sense in talking of a language that is so radically different from our own conception of language that we can't even recognize it as such.[172] In Davidson's terminology, we can say that in order for us to take a lion to be talking, we have to be able to translate its behavior as language-like. But to put it roughly, if there are not identifiable references, syntax, words etc, it is completely legitimate to conclude that lions just do not have language. One might retort, "But that just means they don't have what *we* call a language" or, "that just means they don't have a language anything like ours." But this is precisely the point. What sense is there in talking about a concept that we ourselves can't make sense of? What sense is there in talking about an ideal notion of language that lions might be conforming to that we just can't recognize or understand? As Davidson puts it, "If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything."[173] Indeed, "nothing… could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour."[174] I think we can ultimately conclude that Davidson's initial assessment of the problem is apt, that "translatability into a familiar tongue [is] a criterion of languagehood."[175] I take this reflection on one of Wittgenstein's aphorisms to be one way of making Davidson's point that any potential candidate for radical

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[172] Oddly enough, even this remark makes it sound like we have some ideal conception of language which has necessary and sufficient conditions. But I believe it need not have this connotation.

[173] Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation" in *The Essential Davidson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193.

[174] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 198.

[175] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 198.

incommensurability is simultaneously a candidate for someone not being a language user. Or, in Davidson's own words, "nothing… could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour."[176] Thus, the image of a lion whose language we could not possibly understand is indiscernible from a non-language using lion. Indeed, it is a condition of the possibility of understanding anything at all that we can interpret the matter at hand with our own concepts and thus with our own language. There is no sense in talking about a multiplicity of conceptual schemes, and therefore in no talking about conceptual relativism between worldviews.

3.2. Translation: A Transcendental Argument for Commensurability

A helpful way of thinking about Davidson's project is that he is attempting to provide us with a more thoroughgoing transcendental argument than Kant offered us. In particular, whereas Kant still spoke of a noumenal realm and so was left with the problem of the relation between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, Davidson wishes to avoid positing a *relation* between the

[176] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 198.

subjective and objective realms all together.[177] While Kant tried to provide a grounding for the theoretical sciences by uncovering the conditions of the possibility of experience through an analysis of the subjective constitution of the objective world, Davidson wishes to unite the subjective sphere of language, beliefs and intentional states with the objective world by uncovering the transcendental conditions of possibility of communication. And while Kant was left with a kind of objectivity within the human species as regards science, Davidson's focus on communication protects against this possible inroad of the relativist because communication is intrinsically public or inter-subjective with any possible interlocutor. Davidson's focus on the public phenomena of language allows for him to demonstrate the necessity of an objectivity that is implicit in the subjective realm of language itself. If this can be done, then there is no need for an appeal to *external* stuff that sits outside of the realm of our beliefs in order to compare worldviews. Rather, the transcendental requirements of communication put us back into "unmediated touch" with reality and also with other speakers.[178] For Davidson, one cannot meaningfully separate what the mind provides to experience and knowledge and what the objective world provides; neither can one meaningfully separate subjective life from intersubjective life nor either of those two from the objective world. The three are intrinsically linked. In learning a language one gains knowledge of the self, others and the world in a system of concepts which are interdependent. And again, since there is no way of getting outside of our beliefs to examine their relationships with the world, differences in worldviews become intelligible simply as a matter of disagreement about belief.

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[177] In what follows, because Davidson's argument leads us to do away with thinking of subjective and objective realms as separate entities, one would get closer to what Davidson has in mind by reading scare quotes around "subjective world" and "objective world."

[178] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 208.

Transcendental argumentation generally gives the subjective sphere precedence (mind, language, appearances) because it inevitably gives us our starting point – unmediated access to *something*, if only ourselves. But instead of 'consciousness' or 'appearances,' Davidson speaks of attitudes like 'belief,' 'desire,' and 'intention' as the basis of clarifying all else we know as the self-ascription of these are basic.[179] So, "[w]hat we find is that the accessibility of objectivity – and by implication the very nature of objectivity as accessible – is tied to a constitutive activity (synthesis, meaning determination) which establishes the essential nature of subjectivity."[180] In Davidson's system the inter-subjective determination of linguistic meaning "is explained as an activity which can be accounted for on only the condition of the involvement of objectivity in it."[181] For Davidson, the fact that we can make sense of alien sentences (whether those of a different language, malapropisms or potentially even of literal alien life forms) implies that there is something objective in the mix which makes translation possible. In fact, we cope with these kinds of partial translation failures all the time – but how is it done? Davidson suggests that it is impossible to give a theory of meaning for a person's language independent of knowing that person's beliefs. We cannot assign meanings to utterances without knowing what a person believes and we cannot tell what a person believes without knowing what their utterances mean.

Instead of viewing translation as mediated by a correct pairing off of words with either ideal meanings or with an independent world of "facts" or some such, the ability to understand one another is contingent simply upon our ability to assign truth conditions to our interlocutor's utterances. And of course for Davidson, following Tarski, "knowledge of truth conditions is a

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[179] Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 350.

[180] Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 352.

[181] Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 352.

linguistic matter… Access to objectivity is described in terms of an activity internal to the domain of subjectivity: translation."[182] For Davidson, the process of translation is contingent upon the ascription of attitudes like belief, desire, intention and "holding true" and one's own ability to correspondingly assign truth values.[183] Our ability to interpret sentences is intrinsically linked with our attribution of beliefs by virtue of a methodological necessity.[184] Davidson notes that, on pain of risking that we totally misunderstand our interlocutor, we must continually apply the Principle of Charity.[185] That is, we *assume* that our interlocutor shares our beliefs and we map his statements meant as true onto ones that we ourselves believe to be true.[186] This is how interpretation *must* start – "nothing more is possible and nothing more is needed."[187] Davidson writes, "In a theory of radical translation (as Quine calls it) there is no completely disentangling the question of what the alien means from the question of what he believes. We do not know

[182] Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 535.

[183] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 207. Cf.: "interpreting an agent's intentions, his beliefs and his words are parts of a single project, no part of which can be assumed to be complete before the rest is. If this is right, we cannot make the full panoply of intentions and beliefs the evidential base for a theory of radical interpretation." (Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 186).

[184] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 206.

[185] Aside from its other virtues, I believe this is a nice way of motivating a concern to do justice to the way that believers understand themselves against revisionist accounts like John Hick's and Ludwig Feuerbach's. These views end up being immensely patronizing because they confuse the beginning of the work of interpretation with the end. They say, "This is what this believer must mean because it is the rational way to understand their beliefs." But then they go no further where the first take should only be an approximation which continually corrects itself. Remember, the *telos* of interpretation is understanding the other, not necessarily agreeing with him or her. I applaud an interpretive model which takes ethics – the Principle of Charity – as normative.

[186] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 207. Cf. Mary Midgley's excellent essay "Trying Out One's New Sword" in *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[187] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 207.

what someone means unless we know what he believes; we do not know what someone believes unless we know what he means. In radical interpretation we are able to break into this circle, if only incompletely, because we can sometimes tell that a person accedes to a sentence we do not understand."[188]

There is, Davidson suggests, a triangular structure in interpretation between the interpreter, one's interlocutor and the world; and so interpretation basically involves "triangulation." The idea is that we can use our own beliefs as a key into our interlocutor's language. According to Davidson, the relationship between the world and our beliefs is causal – the world causes our beliefs, and by hypothesis, our interlocutor's beliefs. If we think of a triangle with the interpreter and her interlocutor as the points determining the base, the process of interpretation is the process of finding the common causes of both of our beliefs, or identifying the third point which completes the triangle. Given the disquotational nature of language[189], one assumes that one's interlocutor is talking about the shared world. Utterances made under conspicuous circumstances, like being chased by a lion, will be taken to be about the lion (though of course we do not need that all such situations be quite *that* conspicuous). Combined with the Principle of Charity, one can formulate a provisional translation manual of the speakers utterances based on the beliefs that one already believes to be true. And thus, by continual practice of revision one can develop a working interpretation of our interlocutor's language.

Davidson points out that the chief methodological constraint upon interpretation, that of the Principle of Charity, "is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it; its purpose is to

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[188] Davidson, "Truth and Meaning" in *The Essential Davidson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 163.

[189] I.e., the idea that language refers to something *outside* of mere language.

make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation – *some* foundation – in agreement."[190] A condition of the possibility of any meaningful disagreement, according to Davidson, is that in fact both sides agree more than they disagree. Both sides of a disagreement can understand one another because their beliefs systems share a great deal. If this were not the case, then it would be impossible for there to *be* disagreement in the first place – the two interlocutors would inevitably talk past one another. In fact, we can only detect partial translation failures against what is common to both parties.[191]

It is only once we have recognized this that we are in a position to begin to correct our assumptions and see where there are partial failures of interpretation. But Davidson reminds us, "Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from ours."[192] Further, "our basic methodology for interpreting the words of others necessarily makes it the case that most of the time the simplest sentences which speakers hold true are true."[193] The point is, whether interlocutors agree or disagree about specifics, general agreement about truth is the very condition of the possibility of interpretation and thus understanding. Maker, commenting on Davidson puts it

[190] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 207.

[191] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 206.

[192] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme," 207.

[193] William Maker quoting Davidson in "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 358. Truth for Davidson is always figured in the "epistemologically uninteresting sense" (359) of "'P' is true iff p". I believe Davidson's way of speaking about truth can be productively linked with Heidegger's notion of alethic truth in an interesting way.

bluntly, "understanding presupposes general agreement about truth."[194] Given Davidson's account of translation, what there is to disagree about is limited:

> What Convention T, and the trite sentences it declares true, like '"Grass is green", spoken by an English speaker, is true if and only if grass is green' reveal is that the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged. There is no further relativism to a conceptual scheme, a way of viewing things, or a perspective. Two interpreters, as unlike in culture, language and point of view as you please, can disagree over whether an utterance is true, but only if they differ on how things are in the world they share, or what the utterance means.[195]

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[194] Maker, "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," 358.

[195] Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," 227. This passage also reinforces why facts can't serve to arbitrate disagreements between members of difference cultures for Davidson. Davidson isn't concerned to isolate "facts" as truth-makers for particular beliefs. Instead, he has his Tarskianism which remains within the scope of one's conceptual scheme. Of course for him there is no outside of conceptual schemes either. We can think about this through the traditional correspondence theory of truth. A belief is true if it corresponds to the facts. But what is a fact? Let's take an example. Imagine before you a series of shapes – circles, triangles, squares etc., each made of different colors. Some of the circles are red, some are green and so on. If we are standing together and I say to you, "that circle is green", what makes that statement true? Well, the relevant circle's being green of course. But notice that speaking this way about truth-makers never took us outside of our mutual conceptual scheme – in this case, roughly, English. The concern is that this same model won't work when people are using two different languages.

For example, if a person survives a car accident by an extremely unlikely chance, a religious believer might call the occurrence a miracle – the intervention of an angel, let's say. A naturalist would not say this of course. How might we adjudicate this disagreement? The temptation is to look at the phenomena. We don't *see* the angel, so that would seem to be a casting vote in favor of the naturalist. But for the religious person, that won't be a reasonable objection. Of course if angels exist most of the time we won't see them. But we might be able to see the effects of their actions. Judging by the facts alone, or the sense data, qualia or what have you, the religious believer and the naturalist are in a position of parity. This is not to say that there is no way to break such a tie or that one position is as good as any other. I do not believe that and I think that there are relevant ways to break such ties (we'll return to this). The point here is that *the facts* cannot themselves determine which view is right. We can look again and again at the "facts" and we will be none the wiser as to whether a miracle did in fact occur. Here again Davidson would not be concerned to isolate a truth-maker in the sense of "sense data" or anything of the sort. Rather than appealing to a neutral substrata outside of the concepts of the two disputants, Davidson would simply say that "'X is a miracle' iff X is a miracle." At

Since interlocutors are never “worlds apart,” they can always potentially engage one another. When meaningful engagement happens, there is often disagreement, but the methodological constraints on interpretation mean that interlocutors can only disagree about what words mean or how the world is.

The point is, whether interlocutors agree or disagree about specifics, general agreement about truth is the very condition of the possibility of interpretation and thus understanding. The result is that it is always open to us to interpret apparent conceptual differences between cultures as simply falling out of differences of belief about matters of fact. We can think of it this way: if we meet a society that seems to claim that the sky is green, we would strongly reject this claim as false. We then have two options before us: we can say that they are wrong in their beliefs or we can conclude that our translation manual needs correction – namely that what we have interpreted as “green” is more likely “blue.”[196] Only confusion will result by adding the third alternative of a conceptual scheme. Hence, if the speaker is otherwise reasonable, we ought to preserve the truth of their statement and update our translation manual.

It is advantageous to minimize translation failures between interlocutors as much as possible. Part of the reason why this is so is because the local differences that do remain – differences of opinion, belief or even concepts – will be vastly accentuated, but yet will also be

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no point does our conception of truth, or a truth-maker, push us outside of the realm of concepts into non-conceptualized sense data. In this way, Davidson departs from traditional empiricist accounts of knowledge and justification.

[196] Cf. for example, “If we choose to translate some alien sentence rejected by its speakers by a sentence to which we are strongly attached on a community basis, we may be tempted to call this a difference in schemes; if we decide to accommodate the evidence in other ways, it may be more natural to speak of a difference of opinion. But when others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts.” (Davidson, “Conceptual Scheme,” 207.)

comprehensible. And this last point, that the differences be comprehensible, is essential to the differences showing up as differences at all. Remember, a lion that has a language that is entirely unintelligible to us in every way is indistinguishable from a non-language-using lion (besides the idea itself simply being unintelligible). Complete differences don't show up as differences at all. Only local differences, when there is much more in common, show up as differences. This point, I think, shows why conceptual relativism will always fail to do justice to differences in cultures. By accentuating difference inordinately, it becomes unintelligible. Difference, in fact, ceases to be difference unless it is predicated on sameness.

Why is it that relativism continues to have a hold on the mind of many budding thinkers? There is, it must be admitted, something quite agreeable in the idea that with differences of culture and language come differences in how they view or experience the world. I think there are two principle causes. The first is a desire that other people not challenge one's beliefs. The idea is that if there are different conceptual schemes or different realities for different people, then no one (outside of those who already likely agree with you because they share your conceptual scheme) can criticize my beliefs. And this seems right to me. If it is the case that different communities simply have different conceptual schemes, it leaves open the possibility that one can always say, "you just don't understand" to someone who seems liable to make a critical remark. And they would be speaking truly. The two parties can never really engage one another. Of course, this idea, when full grown will inevitably yield the death of the inquisitive intellect. Yet, unfortunately, it crops up among many who wish to hold whatever beliefs please them and do not wish to have their ideas challenged.

The other, far nobler motivation, is a desire to be tolerant. Conceptual relativism is a very "liberal" in the sense of "open-minded" or "tolerant" idea. It is considered *intolerant* to call

someone else's beliefs wrong when we seem to disagree or when our beliefs are incompatible. After all, we'll end up telling the nice people who believe that fairies cause plants to grow that they're wrong. Is that really necessary? Why can't they be right *in their own way*? Here "in their own way" must mean they are right in some way that we can't possible understand, even in principle. For to think when we seem to disagree that others who hold incompatible beliefs are right in some way that we *can* understand puts our beliefs and theirs back on a collision course; if one side is right, then the other must be wrong. When there is meaningful disagreement, there is always the possibility that one position is better than another. However, this view is much more pernicious than it seems at first. The upshot of this view is that if they are right "in their own way," then we have done away with any ability to criticize, or more importantly, to *learn* from other societies. In fact, such an interpretation makes nonsense of disagreement itself. If disagreement is understood as the result of incommensurable conceptual schemes, where members of different cultures live in different worlds, then two sides never really disagree, they just talk past one another.

But what of the possibility that the other party is carrying a part of the truth that we just don't see? Often this probably does happen when we disagree. But does this point count for or against our thinking of disagreement as predicated on differences of conceptual schemes or differences of belief? Why think that differences in conceptual schemes is a better way to account for this phenomena than the various other alternatives? I think seeing disputes as a localized disagreement allows for us to talk about learning from one another in an intelligible way. Indeed, I think this is the way we ought to take it, for insofar as our beliefs need to be revised in light of new information, we retrospectively see those beliefs to be false in those respects. In this way we can make sense of progress, of gaining more truth in our beliefs.

Otherwise, attaining new conceptual schemes, each with its own set of incommensurable truths makes nonsense of progress.

Mary Midgley provides as excellent case study of just this phenomena in her essay *Trying Out One's New Sword*. In the essay she talks about an ancient samurai practice of cutting a wayfarer in half in order to test out one's new sword. If I want to say that this practice was a bad one, that it was a needless waste of human life, the person who emphasizes conceptual relativism may well say that I should not judge this practice – after all, we're not part of that culture and we don't understand it. After all, it is wrong to be intolerant. Aside from the odd remark that it is *wrong* to be intolerant, people who support this kind of isolationism of conceptual, or in this case, moral scheme, often go on to justify the samurai's behavior. They'll argue that *if we did* understand this culture, then we'd learn to value the samurai culture of honor and discipline and we would see that Japanese culture, at the time, held individual human lives of comparatively lower value than we do now in the West. They'll try to get us to assent to the idea that it really wasn't such a bad practice after all. And they may be right in this, or they may be wrong.

But the important point, as Midgley so astutely points out, is that the very act of justifying the samurai's behavior undercuts the argument that the relativist is trying to make; her argument rests on my being able to understand the values of the ancient samurai culture. And, of course, we can! There is a great deal of nuances in cultures and it would be false to say that we have grasped all of its subtleties, but then again, my own culture is very complex and I don't claim to understand it all either. Midgley remarks that someone who makes such an argument "expects me to change my present judgement to a truer one – namely, one that is favourable. And the standards I must use to do this cannot just be Samurai standards. They have to be ones

current in my own culture. Ideals like discipline and devotion will not move anybody unless he himself accepts them."[197] This falls quite in line with the points that I have made about justification above: nothing will be convincing to a person unless he already knows and assents to the beliefs which function as the ground of the justification. Since I *do* understand the concepts of honor and discipline, we can have a meaningful conversation about whether or not the practice was a good one or not. Of course, coming to a completely informed conclusion about the matter would be difficult, but that is a different matter than conceptual relativism.

It is often thought that this form of interpretation – i.e., using our own concepts to interpret others – is chauvinistic or that it does violence to what is different than ourselves by interpreting others with our own belief scheme. I don't see any reason why this should be so in principle (though of course there are chauvinists out there).[198] If we wish to understand others, we have to start from where we are, not from where we're not. The point is, the conceptual relativist is right in thinking that conceptual relativism prevents criticism. But it also prevents us from praising one another or learning from one another. One cannot value what one quite flatly does not understand. In fact, a person can't respect, tolerate, learn from, appreciate or have any other intentional state with regard to something that you simply can't comprehend at all. Conceptual relativism is simply not helpful and does not even admit of toleration if that means to

[197] Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword," 85.

[198] Again, if Davidson is right, it is only through similarity that we can detect difference. If difference is *so* great, then it is not even intelligible *as* difference. Hence I would say that I don't have *different* tastes in music than my dog; my dog doesn't *have* music tastes. Sameness and difference – much like the one and the many – are dialectically related. One can't simply have difference or simply sameness. There is no content to difference without similarity and there is no content to similarity without difference. Thus, Davidson's method of interpretation sets a limit to the amount of difference that we can meaningfully ascribe to our interlocutors. However, as Davidson points out, it is only with a strong reservoir of commonality to draw from that the differences between belief systems really "bite."

respect what is different. We can respect and admire *only* what we can to some degree understand. The detour through our own concepts is a necessary first step to understanding, and hence learning from, those who are different.

The upshot of my analysis is that translation implies, at least in principle, commensurability. If differences between belief systems are not multiple takes on one common reality – even if it would seem conceivable that we could use this common reality to adjudicate between them – any kind of robust relativism disintegrates. The differences between cultures are, at least in principle, intelligible to members of other cultures. Hence, there is once again no need to appeal to some objective standard independent of any culture in order to compare worldviews. In fact, it is the idea that we could take up a position of objectivity between worldviews that gives space for the idea of relativism. Without it, we have no useful criterion to determine whether or not the world is different for members of different cultures rather than just that they disagree with one another. There is no problem of relativism simply because different cultures have different beliefs. However, now that we have shown, in principle, that it is possible to put belief systems in a position of commensurability, it remains for us to show *how* successful cross-cultural deliberation is possible. How can we determine who is right when there is disagreement? If there is no way to rationally adjudicate disagreement, then there is no possibility for real, rational deliberation. This question will be taken up in the next chapter.

4. Competing Rationalities and Progress

Having now cleared the two primary obstacles to a new theory of rationality, brought about by rejecting Enlightenment theories of rationality – skepticism and relativism – I am ready to begin developing a positive account of rational belief. This new understanding of rational belief will still be couched in terms of cross-cultural deliberation. In other words, is it ever reasonable to think that one's own religion is superior to another? Is it ever possible for a member of one culture to come to see the resources in another culture as superior to their own? It must be remembered that rationality, post-Enlightenment, can never productively be investigated in the abstract. As was discussed in Chapter 1, whether a belief is rational to hold is always relative to the individual believer – specifically, relative to the knowledge and beliefs that that person already holds. Hence, one cannot simply say that the belief that the earth orbits the sun is more rational *in general* than the belief that the sun orbits the earth. What we can say is that it is rational for someone who accepts modern science to believe that the earth orbits the sun, but it would have been rational for a person growing up under the Aristotelian physics to hold that the sun revolved around the earth. All of this person's experience and background beliefs would have spoken in favor of the earth remaining still. Rationality is always indexed to a *believer*.

This leads us straight to the problem we have been considering. If rationality is relative to a what a person believes and knows, then how could it be possible for a person to come to see someone else's beliefs as better than their own? Won't any person engaged in the evaluation of her own beliefs inevitably find, through whatever inquiry she devises, only that her own culture's beliefs are superior to any of the alternative views? Any new belief would have to pass through the gauntlet of that person's current beliefs. Those beliefs act as a background against which any new belief will appear rational or irrational to hold. How would it ever be possible for a member

of one culture to prove to a member of another that they are right? To put it another way, how is it ever possible to learn something which goes against the background beliefs which constitute one's culture? If any new belief is introduced, then the beliefs that serve as the basis of our evaluation, as part and parcel of the same cultural system, will inevitably result in finding that the orthodox cultural belief is the right one. Every evaluation or learning process will therefore be circular. Even at the completion of an investigation, members of cultures will each inevitably "find" that their beliefs are the right ones. As members of cultures are each of us stuck in a kind of epistemic "feedback loop" where the beliefs of the whole system invariably tell us that the cultural beliefs we already hold are the best available? Is there any means of breaking out of this cycle?

One way of thinking about this question is by asking, given that one cannot step outside of cultures altogether, how is intellectual progress to be made? Progress implies, first, that beliefs are changed – that we come to see a belief we did not hold as one that ought to be held and one that was held as one that ought not to be held. Not only that, but progress implies that the second belief is closer to the truth or is better than the first. The very notion of "progress" is teleological, it implies that there is change but change in the "right direction." How can we account for progress? Typically it is thought that the only possible way to break out of this kind of epistemic feedback loop is to find some way to step outside of one's culture and evaluate the beliefs of your own culture, and those in competition with it, from an independent and objective standpoint. In the Enlightenment, this was taken to be the standpoint of "evidence" or of "Reason." But once again, what counts as good evidence for a belief will depend upon the culture or tradition of which one is a part. As there is no stepping outside of traditions or cultures altogether, invoking an Enlightenment notions of evidence or Reason is of no help.

Hence, if we are to understand how successful cross-cultural deliberation is possible, we will have to do this from *within* the perspective of individual cultures.

Another objectivist solution to this problem can be drawn from Plato. The Platonic idea is that whenever there is a dispute between two camps, we can compare the answers given by each to the Form. That is, we can label one belief better than another, but only by virtue of comparing the two beliefs with the Form itself, of which each are an imperfect imitation. Of course, the difficulty for Plato is that this way of discerning better and worse beliefs only works if one has access to the Form itself; that is, if one already, in some sense, *knows* the answer one is seeking. But of course, this makes the search for new knowledge pointless – there is no need to look for an answer if you already have it. However, if a person does not already have the answer one is looking for, i.e., if one does not already have access to the Form, then the means of comparison disappears, and with it, the means for distinguishing better and worse answers to a given question. This problem, familiar to philosophers, is known as Meno's Paradox. The argument is that learning is impossible – if you already know what you are looking for, then you don't need to look, but if you don't know what you are looking for, then searching for it is hopeless. You could look your answer in the face and be none the wiser for it. Plato's response to this paradox, his theory of *anamnesis* or "recollection," provides a convenient way of thinking about how we come to new knowledge – learning is understood as the process of remembering, of recollecting what we already knew in some sense, before we were embodied. Learning, intellectual progress, is understood as remembering. This is an interesting answer, and philosophers who study Plato have much to say about this idea and the means (i.e., a myth) which Plato conveys it. But for our purposes, and for those who don't want to adopt the

metaphysical baggage of the pre-existence of the soul and the Forms, what alternatives are left open to us?

Nevertheless, I believe that Plato's suggestion can be helpful to us. There is a problem, however, analogous to that brought about by appealing to an objective Reason: people disagree about truth, they disagree about the content of the Forms. Hence, in practice appealing to the Forms as an abstract entity is of no more help than talking about "facts" or "the world" or "Reason." On the other hand, if there is nothing which is, in some capacity, "transcendent" of the beliefs of a given culture, then aren't we trapped in the beliefs of our current culture, with no possibility of discovering a mechanism for rational deliberation?

My suggestion is that in order to understand how it is possible that a person might come to learn from another culture, we need a way of answering Meno's Paradox without appeal to a theory of transcendent Forms. Transcendence is to be understood not as something "radically other" but as something continuous with the beliefs that we currently have. Something radically other would be unintelligible to us and therefore could never serve as the basis of a rational change of belief. But something which leads beyond our current beliefs in some sense, while remaining continuous with them, would make learning intelligible and successful rational deliberation possible.

How is learning possible? One way of thinking about this is: how is it possible for a member of one culture to realize that another culture has a better answer to a question than theirs does? I think that any successful solution to Meno's Paradox needs two things. First, there has to be a recognition that members of two communities are talking about the same thing, that the topic under consideration is "the same." This is a greater difficulty than it might at first seem.

After all, post-Frege, many philosophers believe that sense determines reference. If this is right, then it's not at all clear that one and the same question could be intended by members of different cultures; and of course this would undermine the possibility of progress from the start. Second, we need some mechanism by which one answer to the question is seen as *better* than another. This second criterion is as problematic as the first. Here is where we must address how there is a "contextual" transcendence – how each culture leaves itself open for new and better answers. If every culture were a hermetically-sealed set of beliefs, then there would be no possibility of learning anything new. All rational belief would be predetermined by the background beliefs of a given culture. Any debate about morality, justice, God – most of the important questions of life – is already prefigured by the ways that we learn to use the words and by the concepts that are assigned to them. While other cultures may not be wholly unintelligible to us, we would always be, practically speaking, bound to follow the beliefs of our tradition. This would seem to stymie any attempt to meaningfully compare systems. One will always fall back into one's own systems way of speaking and thinking. This results in their inability to have productive dialogue, and ultimately, the inability to see any view other than the one you were raised with as superior. Each side, even if not talking past the other, will inevitably see their own views as best. There can be no productive mutual inquiry, it seems, with members of different communities.

It seems to me that Plato is right about one thing: a person must have a good idea of what they are looking for in order to find it. When considered in the Meno dialogue, this is presented as paradoxical, but it need not be. Many readers are probably familiar with the *Where's Waldo?* books. The object of the books is to find the cartoon character Waldo (always in his conspicuous red and white stripe shirt) who is hiding in a series of busy settings. It's a entertaining way for

children to spend time looking through the silly drawings, racing one another to see who can spot Waldo first. As a philosopher, I find in the *Where's Waldo* books an epistemological lesson. I think it is interesting that people are able to pinpoint Waldo, despite the fact that they have never seen him before in this particular scene. How is it that you can recognize Waldo even when you have never seen him in this new context? It seems to me that you can recognize him because you know, to a large extent, what you are looking for even before you start looking. It's only because you know quite a bit about what Waldo will look like in advance that you are able to recognize him.

Imagine, on the other hand, that I made a book called *Locate Lois*. I tell you that the point of the book is, just like *Where's Waldo?*, to locate Lois (I'm not a very imaginative plagiarist). But imagine too that I don't provide you with a picture of her beforehand. Search as you might through the pictures you won't be able to pick her out. The point is that if you don't have any knowledge of what you are looking for in advance, you won't even be able to recognize what you are looking for when you see it. But note that even without showing you exactly what you are looking for, if I were to give you enough to go on, you will be able to locate Lois in the pictures. For example, I might tell you that Lois is a person rather than, say, a dog. One might have surmised that Lois is a girl. So you would begin the process of vetting your options: animals are out, males are out, etc. Further, if I tell you that she is a brunette and wearing a conspicuous green and white plaid shirt in each picture, you will probably be able to find her even without me giving you an exhaustive description of her. While our knowledge of what we are searching for is only partial (otherwise it would not be learning), it is directional, it shows us which way to keep looking. Conversely, if I had no idea at all what to look for, I wouldn't be

able to determine if an answer to a particular question was good or bad. Thus, new knowledge, new learning, is always predicated on what I already know and believe.

My suggestion is that, already embedded within our linguistic practices, are the two notions that are needed to answer Meno's Paradox, and with it, a way of seeing how it is possible for a member of one community to take the answer from another community as better than the answer that she already had. In other words, a model of successful rational deliberation. The first is the notion of "sameness" or identity. In order for a member of one community to recognize the answer to a problem in another community as *better* she must first be able to *recognize* the other community's answer to the question as an answer to *her* question. Second, within our linguistic practices there is already embedded an idea of a continuum of better and worse. And there is no single idea of better and worse, rather, the notions are embedded within the particular context. So I may have an idea of what a good cell phone is or a good reclining chair. Notions of better and worse follow from of this idea of "what it is to be a good *x*" but this is not the same from object to object or topic to topic. I have an idea of what a good political state is – this idea is not completely filled out, but it gives me enough to go on to evaluate individual political states. Again, if I had no knowledge at all of what a good political state was, then, when encountering a new form of government, I would have no means for distinguishing between a good and a bad one.

Difficulty arises when I meet members of other cultures who have different (albeit again, not filled out) notions of what, for example, a good political state is. A member of one culture may have the idea that a good political state is one with the maximal amount of freedom from governmental regulation etc., while the other may hold that a good political state is one that is paternalistic and actively guides and sustains its members on a path to a flourishing life.

However, neither of these ideas of the good political state are without their inner tensions. It can easily be brought to the attention of the former, that people will use their freedoms to do harm to themselves and others, and it can easily be brought to the attention of the latter that a paternalistic state can be overbearing, particularly when those in power have a different idea of what constitutes a flourishing life than you do. That is, no system of belief is perfect; no system of belief, even if it could be properly filled out, will be free of inner tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies. The world is messy; consequently, our philosophical systems must cope with messiness too.

What this means is that there is invariably an opening for dissatisfaction with our *own* culturally learned beliefs and practices. This dissatisfaction can lead members to look for other alternatives. Dissatisfaction with the current state of belief can create an opening for improving on even important cultural norms. But one does not step outside of one's tradition and evaluate possible answers from a position of neutrality. Instead, one uses the practices of evaluation that one has learned from one's own culture, the same principles of evaluation that led to the dissatisfaction with current answers also provide the basis on which to judge that an answer provided by another culture may be better than what one was previously committed to. Hence, the judgment that a new idea is better than another idea, which we can call learning, is relative to the topic at hand and made with reference to the resources of the community in which one is already a part. And indeed, this mechanism synchs up with the analysis that the rationality of a particular belief is always relative to the beliefs that one already has. Similarly, when one changes beliefs, in order to be rational, the new belief must look superior *from the perspective of the resources that one already has*, and with reference to the beliefs that one already has.

4.1. Speaking of the Same Thing

When a person from one culture engages a member of another culture, it is necessary that they be able to talk about the same topic and ideas and not simply speaking past one another. If it is impossible for a members of various cultures to make this assessment – for them to intend the same question or topic, then there will be no sense in speaking about one culture learning from another. This is a taller order than it may at first appear to be, especially after the "linguistic turn" in philosophy. If reference is set by one's socio-linguistic community, and is therefore not invariant between cultures, then inevitably members of different cultures will simply talk past one another. The problem arises due to two tenets of the linguistic turn:

1) Meaning determines reference: this is the Fregean notion that reference is indirect; the route to reference is always through language. That is, reference is always to an aspect of the world under a specific description. Or to put it another way, reference is to whatever satisfies given criteria.

2) Meaning holism: languages are symbolically structured wholes. Or, as Quine has it, languages are webs. Meaning is determined in contexts through systems of difference; words are defined by what they are *not*. We might think of a color system that only included primary colors and compare this with a system of greater variegation. In the primary color system 'red' means: 'not blue' and 'not yellow.' In the latter, 'red' means, 'not periwinkle,'

'not magenta'…etc. Hence, the meaning of a word is determined by the system it is in. Phonetically identical words are mere homonyms if found in different systems, their meanings will inevitably be different.

These two tenets generate an understanding of language as constitutive of the world. Perhaps the simplest way to grasp this idea is to juxtapose it to an instrumentalist theory of language. According to the instrumentalist theory of language, language is a mere tool of communication that can be employed without distorting our pre-existing cognitive structures. Language, in this view, is merely a way of expressing ideas that pre-exist their linguistic structure. One can pick up words and use them much as one could pick up a tool and use it. Thus, one's access to the world and therefore to truth is unmediated by language. On the other hand, the constitutive view believes that language structures our understanding of, and interactions with, the world. Different linguistic traditions "carve up the world" in different ways. And so access to reality and truth comes through language itself. There is no possibility of stepping outside of language and dealing with the world or truth on unmediated terms. The constitutive view of language motivates the claims made by those under the sway of the linguistic relativism of the Whorf Hypothesis. If language is not simply a way of articulating ideas, but actively constitutes them in a real way, then language seems to set the limits to one's cognitive capacities. The idea is that if language is constitutive of one's reality, then it is also constitutive of one's intellectual life as well.

The important question, to my mind, is whether or not these two tenets of the linguistic turn imply ontological relativism – that is, is the world actually different for members of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, or is there simply one world that is "carved up," or linguistically described, in different ways. If we accept the former view, then real discussions

between cultures are impossible: members of different cultures are talking about different realities. Consequently, it is hard to see how we could ever pin down whether or not individuals meant the same thing by their words. Meaning invariance would be impossible to ascertain. On the other hand, the lack of meaning invariance from language to language would, on this view, make the claim that there is an ontological plurality meaningless. Usually such a view is described with reference to meaning invariance across languages, such that we can imagine multiple worlds articulated in one mono-conceptual language, having only the truth values of identical propositions vary from world to world. The Davidsonian critique of a plurality of incommensurable conceptual schemes outlined in Chapter 3 suffices as an argument against such a view. Secondly, we could think of there being one world that is "carved up" in different ways. Typically hermeneuts hold the latter view. The idea is that the diversity of languages constitutes different worldviews; ontological speaking there is *one* world, but there are a plurality of ways of describing it.[199] Unless one and the same question can appear to believers from varying communities, then there can be no disagreement between them, and no agreement either. Hence, that interlocutors from different traditions be able to speak about the same thing seems to be a prerequisite to successful cross-cultural deliberation. Indeed, it is a prerequisite of any meaningful dialogue.

How is it possible that I, and my interlocutor, speak about the same thing? Since we are trying to uncover a foundation for sameness of meaning, we need something that doesn't make even more basic assumptions about shared linguistic meaning. An obvious candidate for such coordination is ostension. That is, my interlocutor and I can nail down identity of meaning by

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[199] This distinction is important and will help motivate the idea that part of what enables the ability to determine the same topic or question in various cultures depends on the fact that we can recognize the identity of reference under various descriptions; the world may be carved up different ways, but it is one world all the same.

the very basic act of pointing. Initially this seems to be exactly the kind of thing we are looking for; it doesn't presuppose any conceptual or cognitive elements and appears to provide a way of coordinating reference and building up a system of common meanings.

I think this suggestion is mistaken, however, primarily because ostension is meaningless and unhelpful unless one already has a coordinating system that governs it. Pointing by itself is never (by itself) sufficient to pick out one property as opposed to another in an object. Think, for example, of trying to interpret someone's pointing to a table. A range of responses might be taken as appropriate, hinting at the undetermination involved in ostension: "Are you hungry?", "Would you like to sit down?", "Square?", "Blue?" And there is no purely ostensive way to determine that one means the shape rather tactile qualities or weight properties or a host of others. Ostension, by itself, then cannot be the basis of assigning or coordinating meaning. Indeed, the non-conceptual nature of ostension, which was what was most attractive about this option initially, ends up working against the determinacy of simple pointing. Ostension can be helpful in conversation but only when conversation is guided by a subject or question, where features of objects are narrowed down to what is salient to the conversation. And so we must conclude with Michael Williams that "the genesis of meaning cannot be sought in ostension since ostension can work only within an ongoing language which already contains principles of classification not established ostensively."[200] In other words, successful use of ostension is parasitic upon something more fundamental. Hence, ostension is not the root of shared linguistic meaning, but presupposes it.

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[200] Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 80.

Indeed, even if empirical statements could be grounded in ostension, it is hard to see how intentional language, and with it the capacity to express thoughts, desires, feelings and the like, could have arisen out of a purely empirical language. Nor is it clear how one could offer such an explanation without presupposing the very thing to be explained. But this is what we need if we are to show how a member of one culture could come to adopt the rightness of another culture's normative as well as descriptive claims. Some have suggested that such a linguistic development from an empirical language to an intentional language may not be impossible, most notably perhaps, the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars attempts to lay out a pattern by which language with intentional expressions could have arisen out of a purely empiricist language.[201] The idea is that observable behavioral phenomena have the same relation to internal states of consciousness that linguistic expressions have to their meaning. This parallel allows both intentional behavior and linguistic expression to represent corresponding meanings, thus allowing what is hidden in the mind to become manifest externally. Sellars believes it is plausible to account for the origin of intentional language through the hypothesis that the observable behavior of others has the same relation to inner states as it does with oneself. Hence, Sellars believes it is conceivable that a person who only has use of empirical and cognitive uses of language could at a later stage of development acquire the capacity for communicative language.

Against Sellars' position, Jürgen Habermas argues that that intentional meanings could not have developed out of cognitive languages composed of purely empirical expressions. The very possibility of intertranslatable rules already presupposes communicative use. One can put his point another way by saying that the communicative use of language is a condition of the

[201] Jürgen Habermas, "From a Constitutive Theory to a Communicative Theory of Society (Sellars and Wittgenstein): Communicative and Cognitive Uses of Language" in *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 47.

possibility of empirical language. As Habermas points out, "Sellars's solitary language users must have mastery of the same meanings for words and sentences without having performed a single speech act in relation to another speaker."[202] That languages have intertranslatable rules by which one could recognize symmetrical behavior in another already implies a communicative use of language: "even such linguistic behavior must allow the expression of identical meanings. Otherwise even a theoretically imaginative Robinson Crusoe would have no suitable model at his disposal according to which he could come to understand the relation between the observable episodes of the other's ego and the latter's (theoretically postulated) inner episodes."[203] Habermas is suspicious of the notion that a monological language user – that is, one that possesses the resources of an empirical-cognitive language while simultaneously having no social interactions – could learn to recognize "semantic uniformities" [*Identität von Bedeutungen*] in another "solely on the basis of monological mastery of the criteria of one's own judgment of linguistic behavior."[204] Even worse, Habermas doubts the very possibility of judging "whether a given behavior meets the criteria of rule-governed behavior if one does not oneself possess the competence to follow these rules."[205]

Here Habermas refers explicitly to Wittgenstein's "private language argument." Interestingly, Habermas' analysis of Wittgenstein, though of course much more concise, bears a striking resemblance to Saul Kripke's in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, despite predating it by more than a decade. Habermas cites the famous §202, "To think one is obeying

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[202] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 48.

[203] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 49.

[204] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 49–50.

[205] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 50.

rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it."[206] Rule following, for Wittgenstein, is bound up with the notion of what it is for something to be "the same." For someone to follow a rule, their behavior must have a kind of uniformity across changing contexts. However, as Wittgenstein points out, it is part and parcel of following a rule that an actor must be capable of making an error; error must be explicable. Otherwise, if the actor could never make a mistake, following a rule would simply be tantamount to the arbitrary whim of the actor. But if making a mistake is possible, then there must be in principle some capacity for checking the rule following behavior that is not performed by the actor herself. In order for one to follow a rule, one must necessarily have (in principle) another subject familiar with the basis of orientation for recognizing sameness and who can therefore recognize error. Thus, rule following is an intersubjective practice in which subjects must be not only able to recognize errors but also to criticize them. In other words, rule following is inherently *public*.

Habermas takes the point of Wittgenstein's remark to be that "I myself cannot be sure of whether I am following a rule unless there is a context in which I can *subject my behavior to another's criticism* and we can come to a *consensus*."[207] And hence the rule consists in the potential reciprocal relation of mistake, correction and consensus. That is, rule competence consists in the possibility that if one subject is construed as making an error, the actor and the critic can switch roles and the new actor can demonstrate to the new critic that an error has been made. The very act of consensus about an error in rule following presupposes that the interlocutors in fact already have the same rule competence. Habermas concludes:

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[206] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §202.

[207] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 50. Emphasis in original.

> Without this possibility of *reciprocal critique* and instruction leading to agreement, without the possibility of reaching mutual understanding about the rule according to which both subjects orient their behavior by following it, we could not even speak of "the same" rule at all. Indeed, without the possibility of intersubjective rule-following, a solitary subject could not even have the concept of a rule.[208]

And further on:

> …understanding sameness of meaning conceptually presupposes the ability to engage in a public practice with at least one other subject, where all participants must have the competence both to behave in rule-governed fashion and critically to evaluate such behavior. An isolated subject who possesses only one of these competencies cannot master semantic conventions.[209]

The identity of semantic meanings is something that is *presupposed* in cognitive discourse, not something that could possibly be derived *from* it. Habermas' asks, "How could one form a theory that the structure of another's consciousness follows the same rules as one's own?" and "How could one even judge what a rule is?" He suggests that they could not. Cognitive speech could not have preceded communicative speech in such a way as to have given rise to forms of intentional language. On the contrary, if Sellars' "monological language users actually could identify meanings, they would already be functioning at the level of intersubjective communication."[210] Thus, communicative speech is presupposed in the very nature of cognitive speech acts. Rule following, i.e., the ability to identify sameness under varying aspects, is built into language use from the ground up. And so it is clear that privileging cognitive discourse at the expense of communicative discourse is mistaken. At the very least, communicative language is co-primordial with cognitive language: "The intersubjectivity of a rule's validity and, hence,

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[208] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 51.

[209] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 51.

[210] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 51.

sameness of meaning have the same basis: the fact that rule-oriented behavior can be mutually criticized. What this demands, in turn, is not reciprocity of behavior but reciprocity of *expectations* about behavior."[211] It is this "mutual reflexivity of expectations" that accounts for subjects' shared identity of linguistic meaning.

But Habermas cautions us that, conversely, privileging communicative discourse at the expense of cognitive discourse is also mistaken. Indeed, Habermas maintains that some of the short-sightedness he has identified in contemporary philosophy of language, both on the continental and analytic side, comes from this imbalance:

> In every speech act, speakers communicate with one another about objects in the world, about things and events, or about persons and their utterances. Without the propositional content "that p," which is expressed in cognitive language use in the form of the assertoric proposition p, even communicative use would be impossible, indeed without content. Wittgenstein's analysis of language games focuses only on the meaning-constituting aspect of language, namely, its use. It neglects its knowledge-constituting aspect, that is, its representational function. The holistic analysis of language games fails to recognize the dual structure of all speech acts and hence the linguistic conditions under which reality is made the object of experience.[212]

Habermas argues that "[c]ommunicative language use presupposes cognitive use, whereby we acquire propositional contents, just as, inversely, cognitive use presupposes communicative use, since assertions can only be made by means of constative speech acts."[213] The two are learned together.

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[211] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 59.

[212] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 62.

[213] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 64.

Unless statements are understood to be simply noise, it must be *about* something. And not about something private, but about something shared. Hence, it is part of the nature of discourse to be disquotational, to be about a shared world. And importantly, not just the world populated only by those sharing our particular language and culture, but the world *as such*. When speaking we all take ourselves to be talking about a world beyond our merely culturally constituted world. Each of us, in making every day claims, are implicitly realists.[214] As Habermas puts it, "Subjects engaged in their practices refer *to* something in the objective world, which they suppose as existing independently and the same for everyone, from *within* the horizon of their lifeworld."[215] That is, although a particular language may be constitutive of the world, the claims made within a particular culture are not *meant* as ontologically relative, but are projected beyond the linguistic and cultural horizon to a world which exists independently of us.

Understood in the realm of philosophy of religion, we can say that each culture's claims about God are not meant as pertaining to their own particularistic deity, but rather those claims are made about God. In other words, and by way of example, we can understand the differing descriptions of God under various cultural descriptions as not picking out *different* deities, but as claims about a *singular* entity which may or may not be true. To put it another way, the philosopher John Hick in his *An Interpretation of Religion* has suggested a Kantian inspired mode of understanding religious language by an analogy with the first *Critique*. The idea is that

[214] To put this in the context of the argument in Chapter 2, the unity and reality of the subject matter under dispute is part of the hinge around which the door swings in a particular inquiry. When members of two cultures are debating about a purported quality of God, for example, they must (as a matter of deliberative practice) treat God's nature as something independent of their opinions about it. They cannot simultaneously entertain doubts about God's existence, for instance (at least not without changing inquiries). God's existence is posited.

[215] Jürgen Habermas, "Introduction: Realism after the Linguistic Turn" in *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 16.

God takes the place of *noumena* in the Kantian system; the differing cultural conceptions of the divine correspond to how the divine must appear under different cultural and linguistic structures.[216] Hence, the differences between the different manifestations of the divine are simply various phenomenological appearances of the divine. The trouble is that religious believers do not take themselves to be talking about simple phenomenological manifestations of the divine, but take themselves to be speaking about what God is actually like. Christians do not make a claim like "God is Triune" and mean that as a claim simply about a particular phenomenological manifestation of the divine while thinking that when Muslims correspondingly claim that "God is one," they are simply speaking about *their* own phenomenological manifestation of the divine. Rather, statements about God, while they may be articulated via differing descriptions, are still *about* the same entity. To disallow claims made about the actual nature of the divine would ameliorate the tensions between various religions were they to subscribe to this view of their language. Revisionary accounts of religious language do have the capacity to disarm disagreement, but only at the cost of no one in the disagreement taking each other seriously when they speak. And since most religious believers *do* actually take themselves to be in disagreement with members of other religious faiths, I suggest philosophers take those claims seriously.

Aside from the ethical concern with doing justice to the language of religious believers, there are metaphysical reasons for holding the idea that different descriptions refer to the same world. To hold that differing descriptions of the world actually pick out different entities is a philosophically disastrous view. Cognitive relativism of this order entails, I believe, ontological

[216] Of course the analogy is misleading about Kant's actual doctrine since Kant held that all human beings, *qua* human beings, have the same cognitive structures which are not in any way culturally or linguistically mediated.

relativism. It may sound plausible as long as we are talking about spiritual entities like God to say that members of different cultures are really referring to different entities. But I see no reason why a view of language can be arbitrarily limited to religious or ethical claims and not to claims about the physical world.[217] And indeed, such a view would lead to it being "true for" one culture that the world is flat and "true for" another culture that it is round. If the two cultures are actually picking out different entities, then one is committed to the view that, quite literally, the two cultures live in different worlds. That if members of the Flat Earth culture traveled far enough, they would actually fall off the edge of the earth, while if members of the other culture traveled far enough, they would reach their starting point, having traveled around the world. I wonder, if the two walked together what would happen? Clearly this is an absurdity. Obviously we must hold that different languages and cultures are referring to the same entities under different descriptions.

Habermas agrees: "What corresponds to this universality of truth is, with regard to reference, the supposition that the world is one and the same for everyone no matter from which perspective we refer to something in it. We thus presuppose both the existence of possible objects, about which we can state facts, and the commensurability of our systems of reference,

[217] The reason I hear most often that we can reasonably take one view of language when it pertains to religious and ethical claims and another when it pertains to the material world is that there are physical facts which we can know about the world, while there are no corresponding facts in ethics or religious matters. But of course that is question-begging. Why assume that there are no such facts? Often it is said that since there is such disagreement about religious and moral truths that there must be no corresponding facts of the matter. But that also is specious – there is disagreement (still!) among people about the shape of the Earth or about global warming. Does that show there is no fact of the matter? Of course not. One must be able to separate metaphysical claims from epistemological claims. To say that we can't *know* or can't prove *conclusively* the truth of some claim (whatever that would mean) is not a good reason to think that there is no fact of the matter.

which permits us to recognize the same objects under different descriptions."[218] So not only does our language presuppose a common world about which claims can be true or false, independent of our wishes, it is possible for members of different cultures to recognize the *same* referent under different descriptions. Once again, not only is identifying the same reference under different descriptions necessary for agreement, it is also a prerequisite for meaningful disagreement, otherwise the two parties will simply be talking past one another: "If an interpretation that was rationally acceptable under certain epistemic conditions is to be recognizable as an error in a different epistemic context, then the phenomenon to be explained must be preserved in switching from one interpretation to the other. Reference to the *same* object must remain constant even under *different* descriptions."[219]

I believe this ability to recognize sameness in spite of difference is part of learning any language and is bound up with both communicative and cognitive aspects of language use. Hence, the ability to recognize sameness across difference is present with any competent language speaker. Even when talking to members of one's own language and culture, one comes across the problem of identifying the same person, or object or topic despite the descriptions being variant. This is the same skill that is employed when speaking to a member of a different culture. Of course, as with any skill, our ability to make such identifications of sameness throughout difference is fallible. Sometimes in dialogue two people will think they are talking about the same thing and eventually decide that they are not. Sometimes they will think that they are talking about two different things and come to realize that they are in fact talking about the same thing. However, it is still in fact possible to identify the same topic of conversation by

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[218] Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language" in *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 144.

[219] Habermas, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn," 33.

members of two different cultures. And, as I suggested above, this is a prerequisite of a member of one culture coming to see that another culture has a better answer to a question than her own culture offers. As we will see, these differences between cultures, far from precluding the possibility of learning from another culture, is what makes it possible.

4.2. The Lifeworld and the Foundation of Successful Cross-Cultural Deliberation

I suggested at the beginning of the chapter that, in general, learning requires two things. It requires that there be sameness of reference – that one recognize that the topic under discussion is the same. In the last section I argued that the practical discipline of recognizing sameness across difference is learned as one learns language. Consequently, what counts as the same topic in one culture and another will depend upon the discernment of the interlocutors. A person in culture A may recognize the same topic in culture B even though the corresponding descriptions may differ. Secondly, I suggested that in order for learning to be possible, one must be able to recognize, in some relevant way, what counts as "better" beliefs about that topic. What constitutes better and worse beliefs of course will be contingent upon the relevant context. But importantly, the standard for better and worse will not be something purely transcendent, but

the criteria will be grounded, rather, in the lifeworld (i.e., the beliefs and practices) of one's own culture.

If it is possible for members of different cultures to intend the same topic, the same questions, how is it that we settle when one has a better answer? The fundamental problem with Platonic interpretations of meaning is that one is led to think that if we could only get the correct definition or description of what we are looking for, all dispute between two cultures would be settled. The temptation is to think that two different cultural articulations of what constitutes justice, for instance, are derivations of some higher, unifying principle. To deny a higher, unifying Platonic principle seems to remove any means of meaningfully comparing the beliefs of two cultures. As a result, whatever seems true, good and right to one culture is not intelligibly related to what is true, good and right in another culture. One gets the impression that as two different cultures have different descriptions of goodness or God, that they are talking about two different essences. But just as we don't need essences to pick out sameness (in fact, this would often prohibit the way we speak), so we do not need essences to pick out better and worse. I can tell you what a better cell phone would be like even though I cannot give you a definition (in necessary and sufficient terms) of what a cell phone is. In more intellectual debates, one does not have immediate recourse to practical improvements, but rather, intellectual improvements: the removal of intellectual obstacles, increased coherence, less tension, etc.

I hope to show that, contrary to what is popularly thought, dialogue between members of different cultures can be fruitful even in the absence of references to Platonic essences. Indeed, I will argue that it is in fact possible for members of one culture to come to believe that a different culture has superior beliefs about any range of topics. Typically, of course, dialogue between members of different cultures reaches stalemate quite quickly as "fundamental disagreements"

(as President Obama likes to call them) surface, and productive interaction stagnates. While I acknowledge that this is the ordinary state of affairs – that members of different cultures are set in their beliefs and practices and often give little or any ground to challenges from other quarters – it is nonetheless possible. And I think it is productive to understand *how* it is possible.

When members of different cultures disagree – about how the world is, what the nature of God is, how people ought to interact with one another, how political systems ought to be set up, etc. – often these disagreements fall along cultural lines. The beliefs that each party is raised with clearly inform (though they do not determine) our mature beliefs. One is socialized into most of the beliefs that one has – contexts of intelligibility, truth and normative rightness are "taken in through the pores" from birth. Wittgenstein famously called these contexts of intelligibility and behavior "language-games." Habermas supplements Wittgenstein's notion of language-games by meshing it with the phenomenological concept of the *lifeworld* as found in Husserl and Heidegger. In so doing, Habermas calls attention to the intransigence of the beliefs and practices of the linguistic tradition one is born into, noting that socio-cultural norms cannot be dictated by whim as in mere games. The lifeworld is formative for subjects – individuals are socialized into a way of life that grants all other beliefs and practices their intelligibility. The lifeworld comprises the unproblematic convictions of one's society, that comprehensive network of beliefs, norms and practices which members of the culture (often unquestioningly) share. It provides the ubiquitous background knowledge in relation to which our interpersonal interactions and daily practices are governed. Importantly, rules for reason giving, justification and normative claims are also part and parcel of this background knowledge one takes in "through the pores."

So here then is the root of the difficulty of interpersonal communication about what is true or good, about what ought to be believed. Individuals from different cultures carry around different assumptions about the nature of the world grounded in the pre-understanding of the lifeworld. Habermas tells us that all communicative action

> is embedded in a lifeworld… in the form of a massive background consensus. The explicit feats of communication achieved by communicative actors take place within the horizon of shared, unproblematic convictions; the disquiet that arises through experience and critique crashes against the – as it seems – broad and imperturbable rock projecting out from the deep of agreed-upon interpretive patters, loyalties, and proficiencies.[220]

But this raises a problem – one familiar to the hermeneutic school. If the rules for beliefs and epistemic practices are grounded in the lifeworld of one's own culture, then how is it ever possible to critique our own societal beliefs and norms? If the rules which govern rational critique are based on one's culture, on their being simply *recalcitrant* – or even worse, on their being unquestionable simply because they are tacit and assumed – then it would seem that true rational critique of one's own culture would be impossible. Therefore, wouldn't this mean that learning from another culture is impossible? Won't members of a given culture invariably find their own beliefs and practices to be the right ones?

For Habermas, subjects are born into their linguistic lifeworld, but this does *not* mean that they cannot learn to critique the rules of their society. Because language is not purely arbitrary, Habermas believes that "grammatical rules can be continuously made the object of metacommunication."[221] Far from precluding the critique of one's own culture, the epistemic and linguistic practices picked up in one's culture are precisely those tools which function as the

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[220] Jürgen Habermas, "Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld" in *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 237.

[221] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 57–58.

positive condition of any meaningful critique at all. With the acquisition of language we acquire the resources to understand claims to truth and rightness and to evaluate them. This is because language acquisition carries within it the structural resources for critique – distinctions like "appearing and truth," "is and ought to be," "consistent and inconsistent," "better and worse," etc. In Habermas' own words, "For although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality or justification play the *same* grammatical role in *every* linguistic community... [A]ll languages offer the possibility of distinguishing what is true and what we hold to be true."[222]

When one acquires the epistemic and linguistic practices of one's own lifeworld, one gains the resources to make intra-cultural evaluations and criticisms. Indeed, this would be an impossibility if there were not a preponderance of agreement about such practices – one could never learn such practices of critique in a social vacuum, just like one could not learn a language in a social vacuum. However, once one has these resources, one has the ability to turn a critical eye upon the beliefs and practices of one's own culture. One can learn to recognize inconsistencies, tensions etc., within the ostensibly unified cultural structure. The critical mind needs a lifeworld to be born, but once it has been born, it bears within it the ability to transcend its culture's seemingly deterministic rules. And so it becomes impossible to hold onto that "methodological ethnocentrism" which is so popular.[223] Members of any given culture can , in principle, begin to become dissatisfied with the current system of beliefs or practices present in a culture. There are various paths to such a moment, but the important point is that it can be

[222] Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices" in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 13.

[223] Jürgen Habermas, "Norms and Values: On Hilary Putnam's Kantian Pragmatism" in *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 221.

reached. And once it has, the possibility of learning from another culture – of seeing some belief or system of beliefs in another culture as superior to what one already has – appears. But it is important to keep in mind that the resources for this whole process – the dissatisfaction, the realization of a need to look for alternative answers and finally, the recognition of better resources elsewhere – are taken from *within* one's own culture, not from some independent standard of rationality or through the recognition of an alien Platonic essence.

This dissatisfaction with one's culturally given answers to one's questions is the crucial moment. There can be many precipitating causes that cause a member of a given culture to reach this moment, but it often only happens when we run into people with different beliefs. It is often only when we meet people who sincerely and with (ostensibly) good reason, hold widely divergent views that our own beliefs become problematic. A stated belief may seem obvious and justified to you and to those in your tradition, but may not seem obvious or justified at all to someone from another tradition. An interlocutor pushing back against your beliefs can be what awakens you from your everyday coping and living out the patterns of your culture. Once beliefs have become problematized in this way, they stand out from the background of one's assumed beliefs and are thus susceptible to rational deliberation. When members of different cultures who have their beliefs problematized in this way (perhaps by one another), something productive can take place. People in this position will want to find answers, and typically avoid claiming that others are simply "talking about different things": "Once the transition... to discursive practice has been made, the truth claims raised in assertions can be treated hypothetically and evaluated in the light of reasons."[224] Because both you and your interlocutor have similar, or at least analogous notions of epistemic evaluation, based in the grammar of your

[224] Habermas, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn," 16.

corresponding languages, beliefs can come under mutual scrutiny. Thus, when confronting another culture, we can use these same principles, that is, the principles of epistemic evaluation we learned in our own culture, to evaluate the beliefs of *other* cultures. It is this "common semantic dimension makes it possible to make transcontextual value judgments."[225] Hilary Putnam adds to this conviction:

> It is important to recognize that rationality and justification are presupposed by the activity of criticizing and inventing paradigms and are not themselves defined by any single paradigm…. [And] if there is a nonparadigmatic notion of justification, then it must be possible to say certain things about theories independently of the paradigms to which they belong.[226]

While it is true that varying cultures often have different ways of cashing out important notions like "good" and "right" as well as religious notions like "God," when interlocutors engage in a rational dialectic with one another, the preeminent question is, "What *ought* we believe?" or "What is *true*?" Employing some of Searle's distinctions about the relation of linguistic claims intended as truth claims about the world, Habermas claims,

> This aspect of the language-world relation is expressed in the propositional attitudes the speaker has to states of affairs. These attitudes in turn become a topic for debate when an interpreter refers de dicto to an utterance in order to say that the state of affairs described de re looks *different* from her perspective than it does from the point of view of the speaker – and moreover, explains why it does so. However, such differences of opinion between speaker and interpreter can be expressed only if the two refer to the *same* state of affairs in such a way that each of them uses the operator '…is true/untrue' as a proform in order to link up with what the other speaker has said.[227]

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[225] Habermas, "Norms and Values," 228.

[226] Habermas quoting Putnam in "Norms and Values," 220.

[227] Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel," 147.

Hence the analogous of grammatical forms in different languages allow for claims about a shared world. Claims which can be true or false. A shared world, then, is the common subject of conversation; a world in which neither conversationalist can decide willy-nilly what is true and what is false by simple fiat.

Thus rational deliberation, if it is to be meaningful and not merely a matter of strategic action, must be about a state of affairs which is mutually accessible and taken to be objective from the perspective of both speakers. That is, it must be possible to address the same question from within each tradition, but not in such a way that justification is exhausted by appeals to norms within the tradition: "By orienting themselves to unconditional validity claims and presupposing each other's accountability, interlocutors aim beyond contingent and merely local contexts."[228] Indeed, intrinsic to the process of reason giving is the methodological impetus that one hold beliefs because they are true. And this does not mean "true for me" or "true for my community" but simply true. While it is true that dialectic justification can never reach certainty about truth, it is nevertheless the intrinsic goal of justification, indeed of all rational inquiry, that the process point to truth. Unless argument is to be construed as a mere exercise of force, this must be the internal procedural nature of rational discourse.[229] If discourse is to be successful, it is necessary that we hold beliefs, and encourage others to do so, because we think them better than the alternatives.

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[228] Habermas, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn," 17.

[229] Cf. Habermas' remark from "Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn" in *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 365–366: "As a regulative idea, the critical point of the orientation toward truth becomes clear only when the formal or processual properties of argumentation, and *not its aims*, are idealized."

For Habermas, mutual understanding is contingent upon both interlocutors operating both on the level of intersubjectivity, that of addressing one another, and the ability to jointly talk about states of affairs.[230] It is this twin criterion – the cognitive and communicative function of language – that ultimately allows for mutual understanding and the ability to learn from other cultures. Habermas is acknowledging that inquiry is *about something* and this is not reducible to the desires and wishes of the interlocutors. Implicit in this acknowledgement is the fact that language has a referential element – rational deliberation is not a matter of pure will, but is about a shared world that stands over and against the participants in the conversation. Habermas states this point lucidly:

> For learning itself belongs neither to us nor to them; both sides are caught up in it in this same way. Even in the most difficult processes of reaching understanding, all parties appeal to the common reference point of possible consensus, even if this reference point is projected in each case from within their own contexts. For although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality or justification play the *same* grammatical role in *every* linguistic community... [A]ll languages offer the possibility of distinguishing what is true and what we hold to be true. The *supposition* of a common objective world is built into the pragmatics of every single linguistic usage.[231]

Hence, when one speaks, one invites the other to see the truth of the statements one makes. This element of seeing the truth of another's view is evinced in the perlocutionary effect of the utterances in dialogue when the dialogue takes the form of deliberation. The purpose of discursive utterances which are not merely for the convenient conveyance of information, but as a means of finding truth and coming to an agreement about it: "As representation and as communicative act, a linguistic utterance points in both directions at once: toward the world and

[230] Habermas, "Communicative Theory of Society," 62.

[231] Habermas, "The Unity of Reason," 13.

toward the addressee."[232] This is again the notion that discourse is *about* something – a question or a subject matter. Claims and counter claims are made about a subject that is shared by the interlocutors and under the heading of the question at hand. Hence, both sides recognize that their claims could be accepted or rejected by the other: "The speaker's illocutionary goal is that the hearer not only acknowledge her belief, but that he come to the *same* opinion, that is, to *share* that belief."[233] And again, "The intention that a speaker connects with an utterance amounts to more than just the intention that an interpreter attribute to him the right belief without his being interested in the interpreter's stance regarding this belief."[234] At the level of discourse, speech demands a 'yes' or 'no' from one's interlocutor. The goal of giving reasons is, in rational deliberation, to convince one's interlocutor to assent to the truth of what you say.

Yet, it must be emphasized that consensus is not only the *telos* of successful deliberation, *but a necessary condition of it* – albeit in a modality which is difficult to specify. First, each process of justification in deliberation is relative to the subject at hand; the "common world" which is presupposed in deliberation is not a static or uniform thing, there are different regions of, to use phenomenological language, *being*, and therefore discourse. In other words, given the specific nature of the topic at hand, the relevant justification will differ – mathematical justifications look one way, historical another, religious another way still, based on the nature of the subject. Not only that, but given the ability to discuss a common topic with its own rules means that both sides recognize, to a large extent, the same rules for one answer to a particular problem being better than another. Hence, in order for deliberation to be successful, agreement

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[232] Habermas, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn," 3.

[233] Habermas, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn," 4.

[234] Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel," 164.

about the nature of the topic and the pertinent forms of justification must *precede* the ability of one side to convince the other of the truth of their beliefs. Second, learning through deliberative discourse is not predicated on the ability to mutually reference something ephemeral like "Reason" or "the facts," but rather, on the one hand, the particular context and, on the other hand, the beliefs of the interlocutors. The recognition that a person from another culture has better answers to a particular question stems from the beliefs of the particular concrete individual. They recognize that this new belief will resolve inconsistencies in one's own system and so forth. That is, the person who changes their mind recognizes, on the basis of her own beliefs, the superiority of a new alternative. There is no reference to an objective standard of rationality, rather the rationality of belief change is always concrete, and relative to the beliefs and knowledge of individuals.

We are now in the position to answer Habermas' question, "Do the standards of rationality that underlie our justificatory practices merely reflect the particular character or our own culture?"[235] Often they do. But it is not *necessary* that they do. And in the all-important situation when one's own cultural beliefs are called into question, one is open to learning from other cultures. When cross-cultural deliberation is successful, participants must appeal to standards which are shared *by* the conversationalists themselves, governed by the topic at hand, and not to an independent standard of rationality. And once interlocutors bring themselves under this shared standard of rationality, it is inevitable that if two parties disagree, one side may be recognized to have beliefs which are better than the other's. That is, one is put in the position of potentially recognizing that the beliefs of another culture are superior to your own: "The pragmatic constraint of taking the perspective of the other – together with the realist supposition

[235] Habermas, "Norms and Values," 220–221.

of an objective world and the requirement of logical consistency – forms the basis of commonality on which even interlocutors who are culturally distant from one another can mutually correct one another and develop a common language…. But in the course of critique itself reason fights against all local determinations…"[236] Hence rationality is simultaneously "context-dependent and transcendent."[237] The rationality of belief is not static, but one's belief system is always directional – there are always improvements to be made given the internal inconsistencies and problems any system faces. The engagement with other cultures often exacerbates these internal inconsistencies and allows for a member of one tradition to learn from other cultures, to be convinced by rational argument that the other culture may have the resources to answer the kinds of questions which she has been seeking an answer to. Rationality is therefore seen as directional. One does not make a sheer leap, leaving rationality behind, when one learns, but one sees the rationality of such a belief change based on the beliefs that one already has.

In any case, whether as a result of debate or simply of inquiry among members of varying cultures seeking to resolve their dissatisfaction with their own cultural beliefs, it is possible for the encounter of members of one culture to come to see the beliefs of another culture as *better* than their own. It is important that "better" can be cashed out a variety of ways depending on the context. However, the person who undergoes this belief change *recognizes* the beliefs of the other culture to be superior in some relevant way. This means that the person who undergoes the

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[236] Habermas, "Norms and Values," 221.

[237] Habermas, "The Unity of Reason," 139. Cf. also, "Talk of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in any area only makes sense against the background of an inherited tradition; but traditions themselves can be criticized…. Reason is… both immanent (not to be found outside of a concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions." (Habermas quoting Putnam in "Norms and Values," 221.)

belief change realizes – *on the basis of the resources of her own culture* – that this other culture's beliefs are superior, in some relevant way, to her own culturally held beliefs. Alasdair MacIntyre explains that

> When [the member of one culture has] understood the beliefs of the alien tradition, they may find themselves compelled to recognize that within this other tradition it is possible to construct from the concepts and theories peculiar to it what they were unable to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating explanation – cogent and illuminating, that is, by their own standards – of why their own intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems or restore its coherence. The standards by which they judge this explanation to be cogent and illuminating will be the very same standards by which they have found their tradition wanting in the face of epistemological crisis.... In this kind of situation the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgment by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own. What the explanation afforded from within the alien tradition will have disclosed is a lack of correspondence between the dominant beliefs of their own tradition and the reality disclosed by the most successful explanation, and it may well be the only successful explanation which they have been able to discover. Hence the claim to truth for what have hitherto been their own beliefs has been defeated.[238]

It is important to emphasize that it is on the basis of the resources of one's own culture that one comes to be dissatisfied with the beliefs of one's own culture. And it is precisely these same resources that allow for a critique of one's culturally held beliefs, resulting (in some instances) that one sees these beliefs as false. Not only do these resources allow one to see one's own culture's beliefs as defeated, but one starts to see one's opponent's view as *true*. In this situation we have an instance of true cross-cultural learning.

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[238] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 364–365.

Finally, I believe this understanding of learning also provides a way of thinking about more generally about rationality – if the new belief were utterly alien, or incommensurable with the beliefs one currently holds, then there could be no preservation of rationality. But as the person who is undergoing the belief change (and remember that rationality is always a matter of the beliefs of concrete, historical individuals, it is not an abstract, theoretical question) is able to discern for herself the superiority of the new belief, this change in belief is rational. In other words, the change in belief is explicable in terms of reason as the change from worse to better beliefs in a way that is relevant to the believer and the beliefs she already holds. It is on the basis of currently held beliefs – not some independent standard of rationality – that belief change is explicable and a universal form of rationality across cultural lines is understood.

5. A Rational Reconstruction of Conversion

I argued in the last chapter that learning is possible across cultural differences. The reason this is possible is that members of different cultures can recognize or intend the same question between them. When this is done, interlocutors put themselves in a position where both

are subject to the rules of justification appropriate to the topic at hand. Moreover, the grammatical similarity between the languages of different cultures – i.e., true/false, justified/unjustified, etc. – put interlocutors in a position of being able to express that one's own opinions might be less satisfactory than another's. Most importantly, I argued that learning is parasitic upon the beliefs and knowledge that one already has. One cannot recognize a belief as superior to one's own except on the basis of the resources latent in one's own culture. What I propose to do in this chapter is to take my argument about learning as regards isolated topics and to extend it to show how a member of one culture might come to see another's *belief system* as superior to one's own, keeping in mind that there is no sense in talking about this abstractly or objectively; saying that one system is "better" or "worse" than another can mean nothing outside of a particular context, and with regard to a particular concrete individual and her own beliefs.

By way of turning to the primary topic of this chapter, I wish to highlight some additional ramifications from the previous chapters on polemical arguments – that is, the attempt to convince someone to change their minds about which ideas are best to hold through reason giving. First, successful rational deliberation can only occur when the hearer is open to alternative points of view, open to learning. In other words, there must first be some dissatisfaction or uneasiness on a psychological level with one's own beliefs. Often the cognitive dissonance of meeting intelligent people with sincerely held alternative beliefs is enough to create this possibility. It makes one questions one's assumptions, even if it's just the assumption that only unreasonable, bad or unintelligent people could hold a different viewpoint. Other times, the openness to learn occurs through encountering others through the written word. Sometimes openness to learning comes from experiences that are not easily amalgamated with one's belief system. In any case, when this happens, we must remember that polemical argument

can only be successful if it appeals to beliefs the person already has. No one can find a new idea rational which does not have purchase with the beliefs and knowledge one already has. Aside from the strictly psychological dissatisfaction that is required for cross-cultural deliberation to be efficacious, there must also be an awareness of some kind of inconsistency, or unanswered questions in one's own belief system. Sometimes polemical argument might create this opening by pointing out tensions or lacunas in one's own noetic structure. Yet it is important to keep in mind that this more philosophical or logical dissatisfaction with one's own belief system stems from the resources of that system itself. Every system is subject to inconsistencies and unanswered questions. It is one's own belief system that provides the resources for recognizing these shortcomings and also the resources to recognize solutions to these difficulties.

What this means is that polemical arguments can only be efficacious in arguing for the superiority of one's own beliefs on the basis of reasons that the hearer themselves would give assent to. Hence, the emphasis in compelling polemical argument ought to be on the basis of reasons that one's opponents give credence to. George Mavrodes puts this point well:

> If we think that someone is resisting or ignoring evidence, then we might try to make that evidence still more insistent, more explicit, and so on… [T]hat, of course, is what the positive apologist tries to do. He tries to find something which the unbeliever already knows and acknowledges, and to show that this acknowledged fact supports, in one way or another, the belief that God exists.[239]

To put it another way, justification, as found in conversation, is giving your interlocutor reasons to think that the beliefs you hold are true. And this can only be done by reference to beliefs that *they already hold*. No person can be convinced to come to hold a belief on the basis of beliefs that they don't assent to. This is, descriptively, a fact about human psychology. However, to

[239] Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," 201.

speak normatively, I believe I have shown that no person has any obligation to Reason or any form of rationality which is alien to their own beliefs. A person cannot have obligations to an epistemic system which they do not assent to. Reason is not some free-floating ethereal entity; it is a concrete, human faculty of the mind. There is no getting out of our own heads, so to speak. One cannot shed one's epistemic and linguistic tradition and make a case for one or another tradition from the *outside*. Accordingly, one cannot make an "argument from nowhere." Polemical arguments, then, must be made with reference to beliefs as they are already held by the hearer. This doesn't preclude using empirical data to support one's beliefs, but it does mean that in order for it to be in any way effective as a means of arguing, it must already be on the grounds that both parties agree to the manner in which the empirical data is to be interpreted. And when this happens, we should recognize that the ground of argument in these cases is the beliefs held in common, not the bare experience *per se*. Beliefs always run ahead of our interaction with the world.[240]

Thus, we begin to see that if we wish to reason with another person, the only way we can convincingly do this is on the basis of beliefs that this person has, not on the basis of what the other person isn't aware of or has no reason to believe.[241] Rational conversion is possible because we largely inhabit the same world, we have similar forms of justification, we share ideas of better and worse and so on. Hence, the move from holding one belief to another can be a

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[240] Some of my readers may wonder if I am affirming that members of different rationalities are so far forth living "in different worlds" as Kuhn once put it. I do not mean to make that suggestion. But nor am I suggesting that we all live in the same world. In fact, I doubt whether such a question makes sense. What could possibly function (aside from the consensus of relevant parties) as a criterion of whether the world is *the same* or not?

[241] Of course I recognize that a person may be culpably unaware of some relevant belief which would function as a defeater for the belief in question. This is a related, but somewhat different concern.

rational decision when it is made with reference to other of one's beliefs. Thus I agree with what Alvin Plantinga once suggested, that "[p]erhaps [the natural theologian's] aim is to point out to the unbeliever that belief in God follows from other things he already believes, so that he can continue in unbelief (and continue to accept these other beliefs) only on pain of inconsistency."[242] Plantinga thinks there is too small a stock of shared propositions to permit much proof of anything.[243] What he means is that taking humanity as a whole, there is too little in common in the way of shared beliefs so as to admit the possibility of polemical argumentation. Given the possibility of a great diversity in any given public conversation, there will be little in the way of beliefs which are common to all upon which to construct polemical arguments. In other words, Plantinga thinks that it is impossible, via the few shared beliefs among all human beings to prove the truth of theism, or to give a rational demonstration of it. To this I quite agree. The idea that we simply haven't found the right demonstration of, for example, the existence of God is a red herring. It's not that we need a better, more universal proof, but rather we need to recognize that there *is no such thing* and that we ought to give up looking for it. Again, one cannot, psychologically speaking, be compelled by reasons which one does not already assent to, and normatively speaking, the rationality of one's beliefs can *only* be a relation between the beliefs that one already has. One cannot be held responsible to norms or beliefs that one does not nonculpably hold.

Now I turn to the primary question of this chapter, "How is it possible for a member of one religious tradition to come to see that another belief system is superior to her own?" I submit that an answer to this question would give us a new way to think about rationality – a

[242] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 71.

[243] Cf. Mavrodes discussion of Plantinga in "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," 207.

way of thinking about the possibility rational belief change or *rational conversion*. I mean by "conversion" what is ordinarily meant by the term – a reorientation of one's beliefs whether philosophical, religious or what have you, one's decision making, indeed often one's whole self. In this chapter I will focus on religious conversion, but I believe what I have to say will hold *ceteris paribus* for other forms of conversion as well. As I have been suggesting, I believe the only way to make sense of *rational* conversion is through similarity or continuity among belief systems. If there was a clean break, or sheer incommensurability between one's former and latter beliefs, conversion would be either irrational or unintelligible. Moreover, I view rational conversion as forward looking. What I mean is that the rationality of conversion cannot be bestowed upon it retroactively. One cannot willy nilly choose to change one's beliefs for no good reason, and then, as they turned out to be beneficial, to decide that it was therefore a rational decision. My goal is to show that there are resources within each of the various rationalities to give reasons for holding or changing a belief across the lines of traditions. Hence, rational belief change occurs when, from one's own perspective, another belief would be better to hold. The guiding insight is that *the only way to rationally convince someone of something is with reference to what they already believe or know*.

The experience of coming to see another belief system as superior to one's own is, I think, structurally similar to the experience of revelation. What I mean is that just as conversion can't be rational unless one can, from the resources of one's own beliefs, see the superiority of the new belief system, revelation wouldn't be revelation if it was revealing something wholly opposed to what we believed. In other words, what one comes to see as true, what one *can* come to see as true, is always continuous with most of the beliefs that one already has. Hence, the recognition of new truth, of revelation, and the positive condition of rational conversion is this

continuity between old beliefs and new. Even such moments that we want to label "revelation" are so labeled (and thought to be truly so labeled) because the new belief takes us in the direction we *already* had some idea or hint was the right direction. There is no direct reversal of all else that we believed. This could never be a revelation. In a sense, 'revelation' and 'progress' and 'learning' are grammatically (in Wittgenstein's sense) related terms. One can only make progress by getting to one's goal, one can only learn by gaining new truths, and one can only experience revelation when one moves from a worse position of knowing about God to a better one. Revelation, as we will see, is in part making sense of all else we believe; accordingly, revelation can never be a simple overturning of all our beliefs, making all our blacks white and vice versa. This is an impossible supposition. We cannot even imagine being largely wrong about all of our beliefs in this way such that an overturning would make sense. The person who undergoes such a moment may say, "But everything is different." While there is some existential import of statements like these, upon analysis I believe that such experiences really resolve into a reorganization of what was already believed or somewhat isolated additions or subtractions. *Everything* cannot be different. In order for change even to be intelligible, there as to be continuity, never a sheer break.

Therefore, revelation is not completely irrational, springing from something like a person falling under a trance, but that it can be understood to be, in certain cases, *rational*. What is it to come to see a new religious system as *true*? As I explore this topic, I aim to keep the task of finding a mechanism for cross-cultural deliberation front and center. What I will examine is the first person experience of the person undergoing the conversion. From their perspective, conversion need not be irrational, but simply another form of learning mixed with the inevitable existential ramifications that follow along with learning. It is not a merely cognitive procedure,

but full conversion captures reason, imagination and the will. Yet my focus will be on how this process of moving from one belief system to another can be rational, and therefore to show that rational conversion is in fact possible.

The mechanism for learning as well as for rational conversion and revelation is, broadly speaking, hermeneutic. Belief change is only rational when one can recognize the superiority of another's position. And one can have this experience of recognition because of the beliefs that one already holds:

> Upon encountering a coherent presentation of one particular tradition of rational enquiry, either in its seminal texts or in some later, perhaps contemporary, restatement of its positions, such a person will often experience a shock of recognition: *this* is not only, so such a person may say, what I now take to be true but in some measure what I have always taken to be true. What such a person has been presented with is a scheme of overall belief within which many, if not all, of his or her particular established beliefs fall into place, a set of modes of action and of interpretative canons for action which exhibit his or her mode of reasoning about action as intelligible and justifiable in a way or to a degree which has not previously been the case, and the history of a tradition of which the narrated and enacted history of his or her life so forms an intelligible part.[244]

As we will see, rational conversion occurs when one gets inside another view, one can compare them, see one as better. Conversion is only rational when a person can see its superiority from where one is. Rationality is not about the origins of one's belief primarily, neither is it solely consequentialist. Of course if a person asked, they would say that they think their new beliefs will be productive. But most of all, rational conversion is this element of recognition – of a recognition that some new belief is the fulfillment of the trajectory of one's own beliefs. And it

[244] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 394.

is not irrational because recognition is parasitic on being continuous with the beliefs that one already has.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline what it's like for someone to come to see a new belief system as superior to their own, that is, as true. From what has been said, it is the moment of recognition that another belief system is superior that we must work towards. But how exactly can this take place? Certainly it is only once one has entered into another's belief system that the two can be productively compared, and one to be seen as superior. I propose then that we examine how this encounter takes place, how one uncovers a new way of being-in-the-world.

The point of entry for this discussion, following the philosophy Paul Ricoeur, will be *discourse*. In what follows I will analyze Ricoeur's notion of discourse, and specifically religious discourse, as a means for laying open a new mode of being-in-the-world. I will argue that it is just this positive possibility of understanding and entering into a new mode of being-in-the-world that enables one to productively compare belief systems. Such comparisons always take place on the basis of the beliefs and tools of evaluation that one already has, but it also provides the potential for recognizing new truth and goodness and a moment when all one's other beliefs are better oriented than they were before.

5.1. Religious Discourse

We can begin our considerations with a few introductory remarks on discourse in general. This is an appropriate starting point, for Ricoeur states that "for a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of *discourse*… this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true."[245] This statement of Ricoeur's sets the tone for our inquiry: how can one religion's beliefs be said to be true or recognized as good to believe in light of that fact that it cannot be verified in any straightforward sense? One cannot simply compare religious claims with "the facts" or with neutral "evidence." It will be seen that Ricoeur calls into question this view of truth as verification and correspondence of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. The manner in which he answers the question of how we come to see truth in religious language begins with this categorization of religious language as a mode of discourse. For Ricoeur "discourse always occurs as an event, but it is understood as meaning."[246] In spoken discourse this amounts to the human capacity to "point out" the thing we mean by speaking with public devices, proper names, demonstratives and definite descriptions.[247] Because the event of discourse is understood as meaning, it must have the ability to employ and transcend the ideal semiotic code of language in order to refer to a reality beyond itself. Ricoeur here borrows the language of Frege who

[245] Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1995), 35. Italics mine.

[246] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2000), 70.

[247] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas Christian University Press: Fort Worth, 1976), 16.

> called *Sinn* (sense) the ideal content, the objective side of the meaning, the intended-as-such. And he called *Bedeutung* (reference or denotation) the directedness of discourse toward reality which it may reach or miss… Whereas semiotic units are systems of inner dependencies, and for that reason constitute closed and finite sets, the sentence, as the first semantic unit, is related to extralinguistic reality. It is open to the world.[248]

Reference is the capacity of discourse to be "disquotational" and to root our words and sentences in reality.[249] Yet it must be kept in mind that it is because we find ourselves in the world, because we *orient* ourselves in the various situations that we have something to say. It is because "there is first something to say, because we have an experience to bring to language, that conversely, language is not only directed towards ideal meanings but also refers to *what is.*"[250] Ricoeur asks, rhetorically, "If language were not fundamentally referential, would or could it be meaningful?"[251] Indeed, discourse cannot fail to be about something; it would not be meaningful if it did not refer.[252] Here Ricoeur suggests that discourse always presupposes possible hearers and a shared topic or world.

It is sometimes thought that in order for discourse to be meaningful it ought to be about entities we know to be real. Thus, when Ricoeur suggests with Frege that perhaps the "postulation of existence" functions as the ground of identification,[253] this may be taken by

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[248] Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Beacon Press: Boston, 1978), 123.

[249] Paul Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Beacon Press: Boston, 1978), 114.

[250] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21. Italics mine.

[251] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21.

[252] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21.

[253] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21.

some to suggest that the possibility of meaningful religious discourse is ruled out at the outset. For example, speech about God, just like speech about phlogiston, is not meaningful if the words lack a real referent. But I do not see the need of this restriction on identification, reference or meaningfulness of discourse. There is no *a priori* reason why one could not have a meaningful disagreement about entities which we do not believe exist, or even that we know not to exist – i.e., whether or not elves live in Mirkwood (for those familiar with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series). On the one hand, I am not entirely sure what is meant by the attempt to rule out certain forms of discourse on the grounds that in order for speech to be meaningful the entities referred to must *exist*. One must be careful when one lays down rigid claims about modalities which are really the expression of metaphysical presuppositions. For example, one might say that elves in Mirkwood do not exist as Mirkwood is not a physical place. This would be obvious to someone who adheres to the metaphysical claims of physicalism, i.e., the notion that only physical stuff is real. However, it seems clear to me that I can make meaningful predications about Middle Earth about which others can convince me that I'm wrong about. I could claim that there are no elves in Mirkwood and someone could demonstrate to me that I'm wrong. This is because, aside from claims about the modality of Mirkwood and elves, we can intend the same object, which has a kind of reality for the interlocutors, and because we have largely shared beliefs and practices of justification about that particular work of fiction. This seems to me to meet the two basic criteria of discourse, that one communicate and refer to something in common. And this is so even though one of the things that I could be wrong about is the belief that Middle Earth exists in one sense (if I thought it was a place in Kansas, for example). But that would not show that it does not exist in any sense whatsoever. In fact, it seems to be a prerequisite of my being wrong about its existence in the geographical sense that the words first have meaning. The particular

modality of the entities in question need not be thematized at this level, indeed, it would rarely come up in conversation. It should be remembered that an atheist and a theist can talk and meaningfully disagree about the characteristics of God.

Yet, on the other hand, meaning does seem to be tied directly to truth, as Davidson suggested. So it must be the case that I, as an interpreter, have some idea of what it would be like if such assertions about elves or God were to be true or right. Truth, as a mechanism of interpretation, appears again to undergird claims to meaning, and therefore existence. Thus, Ricoeur is right that a meaningfulness of speech is contingent upon the postulation of some degree of reality to the referent, but I would reserve the right to keep a loose criterion of what modality is necessary for something to be *real* or *to exist*. We can imagine existence as a highly heterogeneous multiplicity rather than as an ontological light switch. So let us not be fooled at the outset by supposing that all this religious discourse is nonsense because we know, for example, that heaven isn't a physical place above the stars (then claiming that, lacking a referent, the words are meaningless). After all, we need not be physicalists about existence. And we need not be boorish in our interpretations of religious language.

Furthermore, as discourse is referential in the sense that it refers to reality, to the world, it is also necessarily *self*-referential. The dual referentiality is essential to Ricoeur; it is because discourse always refers to reality and to a self that, as Henry Venema appropriately notes, the "act of understanding the meaning of discourse involves the appropriation of a dual reference: *a world and a self that could exist in that world.*"[254] In written discourse, as opposed to oral discourse, the dual referential function does not disappear, but is transformed. In spoken

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[254] Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2000), 81. Italics mine.

discourse the speaker's intention is the *sine qua non* of the discourse's meaning, but once discourse is fixed in writing, the text will go beyond the world and time of the author – the shared world of spoken discourse is eliminated. The uniqueness of written discourse is its ability to refer to a world that is not there between the interlocutors, a world that is not within the text, but in front of it.[255] The collection of references in the text combine to create a space of meaning – a world created not by ostensive reference but by imaginative appropriation.[256] Ricoeur, following Gadamer, sees the act of interpretation as a dialectical process that occurs between the reader and the text. Understanding is a perpetual "fusion of horizons" between the reader and the world opened up in front of the text. In this manner, the self-referential function of written discourse assimilates the reader into its world as the reader imagines himself in the world via the act of appropriation (as opposed to the self in spoken discourse, the self that is speaking). Discourse, then, not only has to be about reality, but a reality *for* someone. Discourse has to be interpreted or appropriated "not only because words are the symbols of states of mind, as written signs of oral signs, but because discourse is fundamentally the interpretation of reality."[257] Confessional discourse – i.e., when one speaks about one's beliefs – initiates, whether in writing or spoken word, this moment of the fusion of horizons. It invites the hearer into the world that the speaker is laying out. This interpretation is assimilated by the reader or hearer via the

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[255] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 221.

[256] Appropriation, put simply, is the act of 'making something my own.' Ricoeur writes that 'appropriation' is his own translation of the German term '*Aneignung*' which means "to make one's own what was initially 'alien'" (Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation" in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1991), 89. For hermeneutic thinkers, the work of appropriation is the struggling against some distance, whether cultural, historic or whatever it may be.

[257] Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 126.

imaginative projection of oneself into that world. Thus, for the hearer, the world of the speaker becomes a possible world *for her*.

As noted, this reality created by written texts is not necessarily the surrounding physical world which can be ostensively referred to. If Ricoeur is claiming that written texts have the power to refer beyond ostensive, descriptive "pointing" with language, then how is this new form of reference to be considered possible? To understand how reference to this new world in front of the text arises, Ricoeur amplifies his discussion of discourse by creating an analogy between forms of poetic discourse (i.e., written literature) and metaphor. Metaphor is central to Ricoeur's work, giving rise to one of his most important works, *The Rule of Metaphor*, and also serving as a thread that runs through nearly all of his thought. Because a new world is birthed through the interaction of a text with a reader, it is apparent that some form of creativity is involved. As Mario Valdés points out, Ricoeur wishes to "use metaphor as a paradigm for all creativity through language."[258] Because, as we will see, Ricoeur argues that religious discourse is a form of poetic, literary and creative discourse, the path ahead to understanding confessional discourse lies through the work of metaphor.

The tradition of rhetoric treated metaphor as a trope, a figure of discourse or a form of denomination or classification at the level of the word. By focusing on metaphor at the level of the singular word, rhetoric has been blind to the realization that "a properly semantic treatment of metaphor proceeds from the recognition of the sentence as the primary unity of meaning."[259] Ricoeur points out that metaphor is the relation of two terms in a sentence and therefore this

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[258] Mario Valdés, "Paul Ricoeur and Literary Theory" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1995), 267.

[259] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 44.

relation is only born out at the level of the sentence.[260] By emphasizing the sentence over the word, Ricoeur is calling attention to the fact that metaphor is an act of predication. This predication, as Ricoeur believes Aristotle rightly saw, is “an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.”[261] Ricoeur argues that “resemblance itself must be understood as a tension between identity and difference” in the predicative moment of metaphor. In any metaphor along with the stated ‘is’ is an implicit ‘is not.’[262] Because of his emphasis on metaphor at the level of the sentence, Ricoeur goes on to say that the tension that metaphor creates is not between two terms, but rather between two *interpretations of the sentence* – the literal and the metaphorical.[263] Ricoeur uses the metaphorical phrase ‘mantle of sorrow’ to illustrate his point. He observes that “sorrow is not a mantle, if the mantle is a garment made of cloth.”[264] In other words, we can clearly see the implicit “is not” of the metaphorical phrase when we attempt to construe it literally; there cannot literally be a “mantle of sorrow.” However, this observation of the literal “is not” of the statement clears the path for a metaphorical “is”: “The metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which self-destructs in a significant contradiction. It is this process of self-destruction or transformation which imposes a sort of twist on the words, an extension of meaning thanks to which we can make sense where *a literal interpretation would be literally nonsensical*.”[265] There is tension created by the predicative impertinence of ‘mantle of

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[260] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

[261] Ricoeur citing Aristotle’s *Poetics* in *The Rule of Metaphor*, 32.

[262] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.

[263] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52.

[264] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

[265] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50. Emphasis mine.

sorrow' because it is a "self-contradictory attribution.";[266] "in order to respond to the challenge issued by the semantic clash, we produce a new predicative pertinence, which is the metaphor."[267] Hence, metaphor is thus rendered by Ricoeur as "more like the resolution of an enigma than a simple association based on resemblance; it is constituted by the resolution of a semantic dissonance."[268]

I believe it is instructive to compare Ricoeur's account of metaphors with that of William P. Alston's account in his essay "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology." Alston argues that "the propositional content of any metaphorical statement issued with a truth claim is, *in principle*, capable of literal expression, at least in part."[269] Alston asserts that one is making a literal use of a predicate term whenever one claims that the "property signified by the predicate is possessed by the subject."[270] He then breaks down the predicative function of metaphors into two levels. First there is the "very *unspecific* claim that the exemplar is sufficiently similar to the subject, in some way(s) or other, to make the former a useful model of the latter"[271] – Alston labels this "model similarity."[272] On the second level there is "some more *specific* attribution that is

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[266] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 94. Ricoeur is citing Monroe Beardsley.

[267] Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality" in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1991), 124.

[268] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52.

[269] William P. Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology" in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989), 30.

[270] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 21.

[271] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 27.

[272] In the example I take up, we can say that 'sonship' is a useful model (i.e., it is similar in some sense) to the relation between Jesus and God.

derived from one or more particular points of resemblance."[273] To work out Alston's claim, and its relation to Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor, let us consider the common (albeit immensely complex) religious statement, 'Jesus is the Son of God.' On the unspecific level, Alston would claim that this statement is literally true because it is "successful or appropriate in [some] way."[274] Further, Alston will argue (leaving out the complexities of the argument here) that for a theological statement to be useful in telling us anything about God relevant to theological belief or practice, there must be some more specific content implied in the metaphor than just some vague likeness. He notes that "it is difficult to be confident, with respect to any proffered exemplar, that it is not [in some way similar] to God."[275] In general, it is difficult to think of two examples which the mind cannot make out some similarity between, but these similarities aren't necessarily helpful. In other words, it is possible to construct completely vapid metaphors that are in some vague way similar to God without truly telling us anything useful about God. But, in order for theological metaphors to be meaningful, there must be some literal specific content latent in the unspecific, model similarity.[276] In other words, if 'Jesus is the Son of God' is to be taken as saying anything meaningful or true, there must be some definite respects in which it is actually expressing some specific, concrete similarity between that statement and reality. And this would be the point of the theological metaphors.

Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor focuses more on the two discordant interpretations of a metaphorical statement. Ricoeur undoubtedly agrees with Alston that 'Jesus is the Son of God'

[273] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 27.

[274] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 27.

[275] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 32.

[276] Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," 37.

is a useful model for understanding the nature of reality. The difference lies in Ricoeur's articulation of how this naming of Jesus as the Son of God actually expresses something about reality. For Ricoeur, the literal interpretation of the sentence 'Jesus is the Son of God' is literally false. If a son is to be taken as the biological or genetic progeny of a father, then it is false to say that Jesus is the son of a non-biological being if "being the son of" means something like sharing the father's DNA etc. (according to every major monotheistic faith, including the most pertinent one, Christianity). Rather, "it is the recognition of a literal meaning which allows us to recognize there is still more meaning" – it is on the ruins of this manifestly false literal interpretation that the metaphorical reading comes to life.[277] Indeed, there are various ways in which we can map out specific statements which 'Jesus is the Son of God' may be expressing at the level of metaphorical interpretation. For instance, 'Jesus shares the ontological being of God' as a son shares the ontological being of his father[278] – i.e., both are human while both Jesus and God are God (cf. John 1:1). But is this statement to be considered the only rendering of this claim? It does not appear so. Insofar as son's existences appear to be contingent upon their father's one may also say that the statement is claiming that 'Jesus is subservient (in some capacity) to his Father' (cf. Philippians 2:5-6). It appears, then that we can extract two

[277] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 55.

[278] Because Alston is arguing for very weak conclusions in this article, it is plausible that he would consider this rendering of 'Jesus is the Son of God' as a sufficiently literal interpretation. If this is the case, then it would appear that Ricoeur's metaphorical interpretation and Alston's broadly literal interpretation are perfectly compatible. It is hard to tell if this is the case, however, as in the texts discussed the two thinkers have quite different intentions. Alston's goal is to argue that metaphors are fundamentally reducible to literal claims (in principle and only if they are meaningful) while Ricoeur's goal is (in part) to emphasize the creation in meaning that is effected through the use of metaphor. I find Ricoeur's account to be more robust because it asserts that the metaphor conveys resonances of meaning in language which could not be stated otherwise. Alston (perhaps wholly because of the limited scope of his argument) is concerned with metaphor only insofar as it can be reduced and so deemphasizes the function of metaphor carrying with it multiple levels of meaning.

paradoxical claims from the same statement. This may be what Ricoeur was getting at by labeling this level of interpretation 'metaphorical' – there is always a conglomeration of potential claims being made in a metaphorical statement that are simultaneously conveyed. The act of understanding a metaphor is a particular resolution – a particular "unpacking – of these conjoined and conflicting claims, none of which obviously have immediate priority and which can be perpetually produced. There is no end to the possible renderings of a metaphorical claim. Because there is no end to the fleshing out of the proposition, we can assert that metaphor is the attempt to *name* what is not concretely *known*.

Ricoeur goes on to claim that the tension between the two interpretations, "one literal and the other metaphoric, at the level of the entire sentence, elicits a veritable creation of meaning."[279] The impertinence of the metaphor as interpreted literally calls for a new rendering, a novel interpretation at a metaphorical level that resolves the dissonance in the statement. The task of creating this new meaning is undertaken by imagination which is "the apperception, the sudden insight, of a new predicative pertinence, specifically a pertinence within impertinence."[280] It is in this creation of meaning that a metaphor has cognitive value. Metaphor cannot be seen as merely a mistake in denomination or as simply an ornament of discourse. Indeed, metaphor "has more than emotive value because it offers new information. A metaphor, in short, tells us something new about reality."[281]

Ricoeur's discussion of poetic discourse (and as a subset, religious discourse), to which we will now turn, parallels his discussion of metaphor. Just as the metaphor is the creation of a

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[279] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52.

[280] Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 125.

[281] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52–53.

new pertinence within the impertinence of predication, poetic discourse exemplifies what we may call an "impertinence of reference." The impertinence of reference, building on our discussion of discourse in general, will be to a world opened up between the text and the reader. This world, however, is not taken as a straightforward mapping of the descriptive world, but as a *possible* world in which the reader is invited to project herself into. The possible world is the creation of a new pertinence within the impertinence of ostensive reference. There is a further subtlety, as we will see, that this possible world into which the reader is invited, while not the immediate, descriptive world, is nonetheless a world which she is invited to inhabit and orient herself within and to call her own.[282]

5.2. Religious Discourse as the Invitation to a New Mode of Being-In-The-World

"It is in the heart of our imagination that we let the Event happen, before we may convert our heart and tighten our will."[283]

Just as the meaning of a metaphor is created on the ruins of a literal interpretation, so is the meaning of poetic discourse (poetry, narrative, literature etc.) to be found on the ruins of

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[282] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 229.

[283] Paul Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 245.

descriptive reference. The referential function of poetic discourse is begun by the impertinence of projecting the world of the text immediately onto the everyday world. The inability to assimilate poetic language *directly* into the ostensive world calls for the new referential pertinence in the world of the text. Thus, fiction and poetry can "intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility."[284] The world that is opened must be seen as virtual in the sense that it is not the world that can be referred to ostensively or descriptively as in science. Here Ricoeur echoes the concern that Heidegger voiced but assimilates it in the light of poetic discourse: that of the contingency of theoretical, descriptive knowledge upon a more primordial being-in-the-world. Ricoeur observes that poetic discourse

> refers to another more fundamental level than that attained by descriptive, assertive, or didactic discourse that we call ordinary language… the abolition of first-order reference, an abolition accomplished by fiction and poetry, is the condition of possibility for the liberation of a second order of reference that reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects but at the level Husserl designated by the expression of *Lebenswelt*, and which Heidegger calls being-in-the-world.[285]

Through this indirect path, literary works open up a world in between the reader and the text, and Ricoeur asserts that this is a *possible* world – "it is the suggestion or proposal, in imaginative, fictive mode, of a world."[286] In the sense that this world is possible it is virtual life for us – a possible way of living. But this raises the questions, "what is a virtual life? Can there be a virtual life without a virtual world capable of being inhabited? Is it not the function of poetry to establish another world – another world that corresponds to other possibilities of existence, to

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[284] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 43.

[285] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 42.

[286] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 229.

possibilities that would be most deeply our own?"[287] Poetry refers to "our many ways of belonging to the world" – possible modes of orientation, belonging-to or rootedness in the world.[288] Indeed, Ricoeur notes that in symbolic language as found in literary works "[w]e are faced with some significations which do not speak of facts but which point indirectly, by means of the meaning of the meaning, to existential and ontological possibilities."[289] By adopting the relational ontology of Heidegger, we find again the dual referentiality of discourse has cropped up once again – there is a possible world and there must be a self for whom that world is possible. We have seen that Ricoeur asserts that this world that is possible for a self is not the world of descriptive language like science, but is more fundamental to the self's being. But what is this world that shows up as possible for the self, and what does this world effect in the self? As Ricoeur suggests in the passage from *The Rule of Metaphor* above, does not this possible world correspond to *other* modes of being, *other* possibilities of existence than the ones we currently own?

As we noted above in our discussion of metaphor, seeing new pertinence within impertinence requires the "flash of insight" that belongs to the apperceptive work of imagination. We can now see how, in an analogous fashion, imagination figures into the creation of a possible world as the pertinent referent of a literary text. The creation of figures, icons or models of reality offer new ways of understanding the world we find ourselves in. Ricoeur notes, "the image is not enclosed within the mind, that it has a distinctive intentionality, namely to offer a

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[287] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 229.

[288] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 222.

[289] Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 234.

model for *perceiving things differently.*"[290] Here we meet with an important concept in Ricoeur – that of a *redescription* of reality that is a function of productive imagination. In his discussions of Aristotle's mimesis and philosopher François Dagognet's 'iconic augmentation,' Ricoeur argues that imaginative models for and of reality are productive in the sense that they do not simply copy reality, but rather tell us something *new and essential* about it. Through art of various kinds we "generate new grids for reading experience or for producing it."[291] Citing Nelson Goodman, Ricoeur claims that fictions and other symbolic systems "make and remake reality."[292] Because poetic discourse tells us something about reality it has cognitive value: it "makes reality appear in such and such a way."[293] Again, working with Goodman, Ricoeur asserts that we must speak of the truth of art – truth that is seen as the 'fit' or 'appropriateness' of a certain model to the facts at hand.[294] Or again, "Poetic qualities, through their status as transferred, add to the shaping of the world. They are 'true' to the extent that they are 'appropriate,' that is, to the extent that they join fittingness to novelty, obviousness to surprise."[295] In other words, poetic discourse is cognitive because it claims "that *what is* is redescribed; it says *that* things really are this way."[296] Because this talk is cognitive it can be

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[290] Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John G. Thompson (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2005), 292.

[291] Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," 293.

[292] Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," 293.

[293] Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," 293.

[294] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 232.

[295] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 238.

[296] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 247–248.

debated, a model can be shown to be false, and there can even be progress in imaginative redescriptions of reality.[297] The task of the model is, by means of fiction, to break down inadequate ways of understanding reality and make way for new, more appropriate interpretations (redescriptions) of reality.[298]

I do not believe we need to think of Ricoeur as offering something mystical or otherwordly. Nor do I think Ricoeur's talk of "fittingness" need to bring us back into thinking of comparing scheme and content again. Rather, we can maintain, as was claimed above, that the world is not "self-announcing," that our beliefs are already manifest in the way the world appears. However, this does not mean that we cannot, by listening to someone confessing their beliefs, imaginatively enter into the world that they lay out. In this way, Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of a fusion of horizon's reappears under a new guise in Ricoeur's work. A person, by imaginatively taking on the beliefs of another person can learn to orient oneself in their belief system, albeit imperfectly and perhaps initially, temporarily. But along with this possibility comes the very real occurrence of seeing the truth of another's belief system, of recognizing it as better than what one already has.

The imagination does not only produce redescriptions of reality for the reorientation of understanding, but it also reorients our ideas of how to live in the world. Indeed, for Ricoeur, the two are not separated, but are brought under one head in appropriating Heidegger's notion of 'being-in-the-world.' The possible world that is made manifest by discourse is a world in which

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[297] Though of course our ability to actually gauge where there is progress does not entail that we jump out of our own beliefs and concepts and compare them with an independently existing world. Rather, it would follow the model discussed above in Chapter 4.

[298] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 240.

the self can "project [her] ownmost possibilities."[299] That is, the world that is presented is a possible world for a subject – it provides the self with a world to inhabit, a way of "finding oneself among things" as Heidegger puts it.[300] The world that is presented in poetic discourse is presented as possibly being our own, we might say; one that we could appropriate and employ to productively orient ourselves in the world. A possible world in this context is a world that is possible *for us*. For Ricoeur, then, the employment of the image effects a sort of epoché[301] of the real in order

> to place us in a state of non-engagement with regard to perception or action, in short, to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world. Imagination is this free play of possibilities.[302]

The possible world that is created enables us to understand our utmost possibilities and it serves as a call to a new way of orienting ourselves as beings that belong to that world. In Ricoeur's words, "[t]exts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orientating oneself in those worlds."[303] Religious discourse will be seen to partake in poetic discourse's ability to project a world and to create new self understanding in the context of that world. In other words,

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[299] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 223.

[300] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 229.

[301] The term 'epoché' in this sense comes from the work of Edmund Husserl where it was used to indicate a "bracketing" or a "putting aside" of the natural attitude (common, everyday existence) in order to let the transcendental structures of experience (which are ordinarily transparent) appear. In Ricoeur it takes on the nuance of bracketing the real in order to let "the possible" be.

[302] Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 128.

[303] Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 144.

it offers modes of redescribing life and of finding oneself in that life: the "world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the self capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there."[304] Again, we see imagination as the orienting device in the appropriation of texts. In addition to the opening of a world in front of the text, religious discourse apparently necessitates some degree of work in order to correctly orient oneself within that world. Orientation in the possible world requires cultivation of character and of a particular disposition, or way of finding oneself in the world. But, we must keep in mind that in conjunction with this, there is a cognitive element to redescription and this leaves us with the result (happily or unhappily) that it may be that some possible worlds of orientation are more suited to the nature of reality than others.

There is an echo here of Gadamer, that this poetic world is a world that we recognize ourselves in and which reveals the world *as it truly is*. However, for Ricoeur, the revelation of being is not quite so immediate as in Gadamer, as we will see; it must first take the detour through the destruction and redescription of the world. But, nonetheless, it is in our world that the orientation provided by the poetic redescription of reality is either appropriate or not. Poetic discourse, by disrupting reference to the immediate, primarily scientific understanding[305] of the world reveals truths about reality, our place in it and the nature of the Sacred.

[304] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 232.

[305] Gadamer and Ricoeur often take "scientific truth" as a point of contrast for their own conception of truth. I think it important to keep in mind that it is not necessary to buy into their characterization of scientific truth in order to see that their conception of truth is a valuable one. To find an explicit formulation of the hermeneutic characterization of truth in the natural sciences one must look no further than Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: "This is precisely what distinguishes the human sciences from the natural sciences. Whereas the object of the natural

The difference that must be observed here is on the immediacy of our access to modes of being-in-the-world between Gadamer and perhaps Heidegger on one side and Ricoeur on the other. For Gadamer and Heidegger there is a sense in which being is immediate, is revealed immediately, especially in art: "art is what most immediately brings being (i.e., the appearing that stands there in itself) to stand, stabilizes it in something present (the work)."[306] In a work of art an "entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being."[307] Art is seen here as a way of unveiling the being of entities in the world – there is a disclosure of the "what and how it is" of a particular being.[308] Gadamer's chapter in *Truth in Method*, "Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation", is rife with such allusions, of which I must limit myself to a few: "My thesis, then, is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because, on

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sciences can be described idealiter as what would be known in the perfect knowledge of nature, it is senseless to speak of a perfect knowledge of history, and for this reason it is not possible to speak of an 'object in itself' toward which its research is directed" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1989), 285). This characterization indicates that for natural science there is an "object in itself" that can be given to selves who study it. Gadamer himself added a note that after three decades of development in the philosophy of science since the book's publication, he willingly admits that his formulation does not address the full complexity of truth in science. We too must note that philosophy of science has had much to say on the topic of truth in science which does not allow for Gadamer's early formulation of scientific truth as some sort of naïve realism to stand. Indeed, one only needs to point to standard interpretations of Quantum Theory to realize that many scientists do not believe that the systems or objects of research exist independently of the observers who study them.

[306] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987), 159. We will address Ricoeur's adaptation of *aletheia* in the context of manifestation below.

[307] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, eds. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 2001), 190.

[308] Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 190.

the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is a part of the *event of being that occurs in presentation…*"[309] And again:

> Tragic pensiveness does not affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero but rather a metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that 'this is how it is' is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives. The tragic affirmation is an insight that the spectator has by virtue of the continuity of meaning in which he places himself.[310]

As noted then, being is revealed to the subject immediately in the subject's recognition that 'this is how it is' and 'this is the world in which I find myself.' In Ricoeur's work, on the other hand, we find a necessity of reflection in which one changes to a second order, critical stance in which the structures of being and being-in-the-world are worked out. Here we find that through the act of *critical reflection* we can achieve an unveiling of our *primordial* being and being in relation with the Sacred. For example, in his seminal work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur labors through critical interpretation on symbols to reawaken the understanding of our relation to the Sacred present in those symbols. As a modern culture we have been alienated from our fundamental relation to the Sacred through these primordial symbols, "[b]ut if we can no longer live the great symbolism of the Sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can… aim at a second naïveté[311] in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* that we can

[309] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 116.

[310] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 132.

[311] When Ricoeur says 'naïveté' of belief, he is not using the word in a pejorative or patronizing sense. Rather, he is indicating the *immediacy* of belief when individuals live in direct relation to the symbols of the Sacred via original belief. He thinks that we cannot go back to the type of belief that was possible before the modern critical attitude, but that we should employ this attitude to reach a new way of encountering symbols of the Sacred. This second naïveté is a way

hear again."[312] It is through the work of critical interpretation that we once again can understand our fundamental relation to the Sacred present in things like symbols, metaphor and religious discourse: "I believe that being can still speak to me – no longer, of course, under the precritical form of immediate belief, but as the *second immediacy* aimed at by hermeneutics. This second naïveté aims to be the *postcritical* equivalent of the precritical hierophany."[313] We can never again encounter our being in relation to the Sacred through the precritical immediate belief that we once had. Yet Ricoeur offers us a new way of understanding our being, that of critical reflection on the original religious symbolism and discourse.

For Ricoeur, poetic discourse is an umbrella term for language whose referential function differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary and scientific language.[314] Ricoeur is clear in his essay "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation" that he considers the various biblical genres (narrative, prophecy, apocalypse, parable, prescription, hymn and wisdom) as contained under the heading of poetic discourse. Since this claim is made, we can agree with Gary Comstock's assesment that for Ricoeur "religious language… is a form of poetic discourse."[315]

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of understanding the nature of the Sacred these symbols convey in order to recapture a basic, robust relation to the Sacred that can coexist with the critical attitude.

[312] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1969), 351.

[313] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352. Emphasis mine.

[314] Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 70, no. ½ (Jan.–Apr., 1977): 23 and also Ricoeur, "Naming God," 232.

[315] Gary Comstock., "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 2. (April, 1986): 131. Ricoeur makes this claim again in "Naming God," 232, but with a few minor provisos.

Religious discourse shares with poetic discourse its cognitive capacity, it too is saying something about reality: "for a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse… philosophy is implied in this inquiry because this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true."[316] But to what kind of truth does religious discourse lay claim? Ricoeur asserts that it is less the truth of the scientist than that of the poet.[317] Like metaphor, a literal interpretation as reference to the world of simple descriptive facts is literally false, but that does not mean that Ricoeur believes that religious language is untrue or meaningless. Rather, he believes that

> The poetic gives rise to a dimension of meaning that is simply not available at the level of non-poetic, descriptive, apodictic, ordinary language expressions. The genius of religious discourse, a genius it shares with poetry in general, is its power of redescription… the religious, like the poetic, is revelatory because of this power.[318]

[316] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 35.

[317] There is an important question to be asked here about whether Ricoeur is equivocating in his use of the word 'truth.' Is this remark an innocuous one, or is he subtly attempting to pull the wool over our eyes? I think Ricoeur is merely indicating a likeness between religious discourse and poetic discourse as avenues of revealing the 'way things are' (cf. Heidegger's employment of *aletheia* in *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers,1962), page 262 in the English, 219 in the German). Ricoeur may have in mind here the interpretation of Heidegger which leads to a plurality of "beings," i.e., scientific, artistic, etc. It seems to me, however, that these are various avenues of disclosing being – each with their own sphere, terminology, methods, certainly, but each nonetheless express various modes of specifically *human* being which underlies each specific "branch."

[318] W. David Hall, "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Poetic Redescription of Reality," *Literature and Theology*, vol. 20, no. 2. (June 2006): 201.

Because religious discourse does not refer to the world of empirical facts its truth criterion is not that of "verification or falsification but of manifestation."[319] Manifestation,[320] in brief, is "letting what shows itself be."[321]

An important question here may be raised as to whether manifestation, when applied to religious symbols (as in his essay "Manifestation and Proclamation"), Ricoeur is in some sense *making* or *creating* the truth of religious discourse. A text taken to support this claim may be: "To see the world as sacred is at the same time to *make* it sacred, to consecrate it."[322] Ricoeur acknowledges that in encountering items functioning as religious symbols (e.g., water) there is at least a "minimal hermeneutics,"[323] because, after all, symbols are only symbols when interpreted,[324] that is, when they appear to someone. But Ricoeur emphasizes that symbols are *bound* to the universe – their meaning is *there*, in the cosmos; there is a certain "fittingness" that

[319] David Pellauer, "Paul Ricoeur on the Specificity of Religious Language," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 61, no. 3. (July, 1981): 268.

[320] I think there is an important sense in which Ricoeur's employment of manifestation in relation to discourse is echoing Heidegger's: "Discourse 'lets something be seen'…: that is, it lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about. In discourse…, so far as it is genuine, *what* is said is drawn *from* what the talk is about, so that discursive communication, in what it says, makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party. This is the structure of the [logos] as [discourse]. This mode of making manifest in the sense of letting something be seen by pointing it out, does not go with all kinds of 'discourse'" (*Being and Time*, 56/32). It is because discourse is a "letting-something-be-seen" by pointing it out that it can be true or false (*Being and Time*, 56/33).

[321] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 25.

[322] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 51.

[323] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 54.

[324] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 54.

religious symbolism relies on. The symbolic spectacles we are referring to are not mute;[325] we cannot impose whatever we wish upon a given item in the cosmos. Ricoeur points to the necessary "adherence" of symbols to the "configurations of the cosmos": "Symbols come to language only to the extent that the elements of the world themselves become transparent, that is, when they allow the transcendent to appear through them."[326] Indeed, symbols are only significant when they portray something of, or partake in that which they are symbolizing. Ricoeur argues that interpretation can only get under way when there is an immediate relation between the appearance and its meaning. A thing is a symbol only if it already conveys that which it is taken as symbolizing. Ricoeur sums up by stating that "the sacredness of nature shows itself in symbolically saying itself. And the showing founds the saying, not vice versa. Its sacrality is immediate or it does not exist."[327] Thus, while religious symbolism is only one aspect of what we are discussing here, we can infer from this discussion that for Ricoeur religious discourse is not making truth, but is revealing what is *there*.

Religious discourse is an attempt to make sense of the world we are thrown into, the world we find ourselves in – it is the attempt to orient ourselves productively in a world that is fraught with the Sacred, or as Mircea Eliade puts it, hierophanies. The fact is that we live in a world where there is a lunar cycle in which the moon is born, dies and is reborn every so many days. We find ourselves in a world where vegetable life dies every Autumn and resurrects every Spring.[328] Thus we have dying God myths from as simple as the death and resurrection of the

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[325] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 53.

[326] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 53.

[327] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 54.

[328] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" 53–54.

corn kings to Dionysus, Osiris and Balder to Jesus. These stories *do not merely mimic the natural cycles*, but rather tell us something about the reality humans find themselves in – they reveal aspects of our belonging to reality, of being. Our interaction with the cosmos reveals these aspects of reality that we refigure in our myths. These myths fall under the domain of poetic discourse as iconic augmentation – they add to our understanding and reveal the essence of reality. Yet they are stories, not theological treatises and, as Ricoeur points out, they can not serve as the basis for rigorous knowledge about the Sacred, but they do attempt to name the God who is ever beyond the sphere of our reason. Indeed, David Pellauer suggests that Ricoeur's task is to find a middle ground between thought and knowledge in the indirect discourse of metaphorical language.[329] In this manner, Ricoeur attempts to demonstrate how it is possible to *name* God – to make the Absolute manifest, without ever having access to absolute *knowledge* about him. The name 'God' is seen in religious language as the "Name which is the point of intersection and the vanishing point of all our discourse about God, the name of the unnameable.[330]

Religious discourse contains, according to Ricoeur, a number of genres: narrative, prophecy, apocalypse, parable, prescription, hymn and wisdom (at least, in the Semitic faiths, these are the dominant genres). These forms of discourse, as abstractions from their more general headings as religious and poetic discourse, serve as avenues of naming God. Ricoeur emphasizes the 'polyphonic' nature of the representations of God in religious discourse: "God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as the one to who one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type,

[329] Pellauer, "Paul Ricoeur on the Specificity of Religious Language," 281–282.

[330] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 26.

or sometimes as the one whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me."[331] These various modes of understanding God cannot be conflated, especially under a philosophical conception of God as beyond being something. The name 'God' says more than 'being' because it presupposes the entire network of prophecies, narratives, etc. God is named in the intersection of these various forms of discourse:

> 'God-talk,' to use John Macquarrie's phrase, proceeds from the concurrence and convergence of these partial discourses. The God-referent is at once the coordinator of these varied discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them… [to speak of God] is to open up a horizon that escapes from the closure of discourse.[332]

Although God can be named, he is perpetually outstripping these names; he can never be absolutely and fully known.

To get a feel for how religious discourse can serve as a mode of naming an unknowable God, I will briefly consider two of the genres on which Ricoeur has written: narrative discourse and the discourse of parables in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The function of narrative discourse is to name God by recounting the events that speak of God. There is an emphasis on founding events that "engender history"; that is, the events reorient the lives of the community around a new pole, a new revelation of the character of the deity.[333] There is a break in the ordinary course of history and people react to the intrusion of the Sacred into the profane. Not only does the event engender a new orientation into the world, as Ricoeur appropriately notes, "[c]onfession takes place through narration" – the community is compelled to speak of their new

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[331] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 41.

[332] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 45. Cf. "Naming God," pages 227 and 228.

[333] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 5.

understanding of the Sacred.[334] The narration of these events is confessional because it is always told from the perspective of the believing community. The unique feature of narrative confession is its "aiming at God's trace in the event."[335] God is named in the confessional narration of reorienting events. To be overly simplistic, we may say that through the Jewish narration of the Exodus, God is named as Liberator; in the book of Acts, God is named as Savior, etc. As with any form of discourse, there is first an event which must be brought to language: "God's mark is in history before being in speech."[336] The naming function of narrative discourse attempts to tell us something about reality, i.e., the nature of God, and as we will see, can be either true or false.

Parables too teach us a name for God, but somewhat indirectly as Jesus uses them to teach us about the "logic" of God as that of superabundance. Parables, are "metaphor[s] of normalcy."[337] Under the pretext of normalcy, parables employ paradox and hyperbole as "limit-expressions" in order to redescribe reality and open our experiences "in the direction of experiences that themselves are limit-experiences."[338] Parables invariably lead to the result that the extraordinary is to be found, or better, to be brought into existence, in the ordinary. The parable presents the world of the day to day, but it is transfigured by the introduction of an extreme element – a paradox or a hyperbole. These limit-experiences can only be brought to language by such limit-expressions; what is wholly practical can only be brought to language by

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[334] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 6.

[335] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 7.

[336] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 6.

[337] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," 57.

[338] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," 61.

analogy.[339] In other words, the call of a new reorientation of praxis can only be brought about by the surplus of meaning provided by the metaphoric parable, which cannot be contained by a simple maxim. Ricoeur points us to two such parables:

> The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.
>
> Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it (Matthew 13:44-47, NIV).

The reaction to these stories is generally "pragmatic shock," so to speak – who would do such a thing? Of course, the answer is implied – one who is acquainted with the kingdom of God would do such things. Ricoeur observes, "there is no parable that does not introduce into the very structure of the plot an implausible characteristic, something insolent, disproportionate; that is, something scandalous."[340] There is a disorienting aspect to the shock of the parable which Jesus utilizes – all parables "*dis*orient only in order to *re*orient us."[341] The upshot of this consideration of God as superabundance has the upshot that we are to reorient ourselves in light of Jesus' radical commands. The mode of existence to which we are called is what Ricoeur calls "the law

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[339] Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 242.

[340] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 229.

[341] Paul Ricoeur, "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 281.

of extravagance" or the "logic of superabundance."[342] Of course, there really is nothing law-like or logical in the traditional sense about the reorientation that is called for: "nothing is more foreign to the spirit of the gospel than the pretension of deducing a fixed morality from the paradoxical precepts of Jesus."[343] The naming of God (via narrative, parable or the others), is a part of religious discourse's redescribing of reality and calls for us to reorient ourselves in reality and toward the Sacred – to instantiate a new law and a new logic.

Importantly, Ricoeur realizes that this reorientation is not simply at the level of the ethical will or the understanding but at the level of the imagination which overarches them both.[344] There are three moments in which this reorientation takes place: first the disorientation of the Event (whether a parable, narrative etc.), then reorientation, and finally acting accordingly. Or in Ricoeur's poetic phrasing "letting the Event blossom, looking in another direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision."[345]

In the preceding discussion, there seemed to be an insinuation that the reorientation of the intellect (i.e., creation of understanding of reality) and the reorientation of ethical action are two separate things. However, it is important that for Ricoeur there are two moments of the same transfiguration of the imagination into embracing new ways of being-in-the-world. Reorientation is the imaginative capacity to create new dispositions, of finding oneself in reality

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[342] Cf. "Naming God" and "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God" in *Figuring the Sacred* on pages 229 and 282, respectively, as well as "The Hermeneutics of Symbols" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Beacon Press: Boston, 1978), 57.

[343] Ricoeur, "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," 283.

[344] Ricoeur, "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," 281.

[345] Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 241.

based on an Event "from whose basis *I orient myself* and *all my choices*."[346] As Fred Clothey points out, "religious persons are 'map-makers,' to use Jonathan Z. Smith's phrase, for they use the forms of religion [i.e., religious discourse] to provide orientation to that which is thought to transcend the forms."[347] Mapmaking is a central concept for us because the metaphor gets across the notion that it is possible to orient ourselves productively in reality and in our relation to the Sacred without having absolute knowledge or certainty about every single aspect of the mapped territory. The better the map is, the better the map will explain, take into account and represent. However, maps can be partial and still be effective – i.e., when one receives simple directions in an unknown town. A map in one's head does not have to correspond to reality in a one to one fashion in order to be effective. In other words, a map of how to get to the White House from a nearby highway does not have to take into account or name every alleyway in order to get the job done. The point is that maps can orient us *productively* without being *exhaustive* though a map that is more exhaustive than another may be said to be a more complete representation of reality. It appears that this is exactly the manner in which to account for a certain realism[348] to be retained in the naming of God without believing that our knowledge is therefore absolute or certain. To be more specific, religious discourse is *true* insofar as it reveals the world as it is and

[346] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 47.

[347] Fred W. Clothey, "Toward a Comprehensive Interpretation of Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 2 no. 2 (1988): 152.

[348] A productive way to understand realism in language is the following: *p* is true if and only if *p* obtains. So for the realist, the statement 'snow is white' is true if and only if snow is indeed white. In terms of religious names for God, we can say that 'God is a liberator' is true if and only if God is actually a liberator. This depiction of realism is borrowed from William P. Alston ("Realism and the Christian Faith," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 38, (1995): 38.) only to provide us with a functional yet succinct characterization of realism by a noted philosopher. In this context what I am attempting to demonstrate in this paper is that there is a way in which one can attempt to detect if religious claims about the nature of reality *do actually obtain* while still acknowledging the fact that we can never be absolutely certain about the truth of these claims.

allows us to correctly orient ourselves in the world and towards the Sacred via its ability to create accurate maps of reality.

The map also lays out new possibilities of ethical action. Indeed, the lines between the two begin to blur at the limit of new possibilities of being-in-the-world because finding oneself in a world is, for a human, necessarily a world full of others. Religious discourse, in reorienting us in the world in a new fashion, causes new things to show up to us in our experience of the world. In terms of our ethical orientation in the world, this might mean that people who had previously been on the periphery of our concern are now central. The adoption of a new understanding of reality leads to a new possibility of "[f]inding the other, finding ourselves, finding the world, recognizing those whom we had not even noticed, and those whom we don't know too well and whom we don't know at all."[349]

There is a dual result of mapmaking, then: the creation of understanding of the reality that is mapped, and the creation of an ability to navigate effectively in that reality. The conjunction of these two elements is what Ricoeur, in various texts, titles 'revelation.' Revelation, for Ricoeur, is the power of religious discourse (as well as any other discourse, in a broader sense) to make sense of reality by presenting us with possible modes of being-in-the-world. He writes,

> I believe that the fundamental theme of Revelation is the awakening and this call, into the heart of existence, of the imagination of the possible. The possibilities are opened before man which fundamentally constitute what is revealed. The revealed as such is an opening to existence, *a possibility of existence.*[350]

[349] Ricoeur, "Listening to the Parables of Jesus," 240.

[350] Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," 237.

Or again, a religious text "is revealed to the extent that *the new being unfolded there is itself revelatory with respect to the world, to all of reality, including my existence and my history*. In other words, revelation, if the expression is meaningful, is a trait of the biblical world."[351] It is the capacity of the religious text to reorient the reader into new modes of being-in-the-world that the religious text can be said to be 'revealed'; i.e., insofar as the text *itself* is *revelatory*.

The result of a good map is the ability to make sense of things, to understand the reality that we find ourselves in. For the religious believer mapmaking is often centered on a specific event, sometimes experienced personally, frequently testified to in a text, which the map is built around. Employing Eliade's terminology, Ricoeur notes, for example that "for Christians, Golgatha becomes a new *axis mundi*" – it is the orienting Event of the community.[352] And again, "to every manifestation there corresponds a manner of being-in-the-world."[353] On this point Ricoeur approvingly cites H. Richard Niebuhr,[354]

> 'Rational religion appeals to the direct intuition of special occasions, and to the elucidatory power of its concepts for all occasions.' The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.[355]

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[351] Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 44. Cf. also his "Naming God," 221.

[352] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," 66.

[353] Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," 51.

[354] Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 146.

[355] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 2006), 50. Niebuhr is citing Alfred North Whitehead.

From the starting point of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, for example, the Christian community goes about making sense of the reality they find themselves in. Their past, present and future is reoriented in light of the event which makes every other event intelligible. This is essentially the project of religious mapmaking. It is taking the names of God and refiguring one's individual and communal narrative by the event of naming. It is here that we meet the confessional language of the religious community testifying to their understanding of reality: "That Jesus had been born in the fullness of time meant that all things which had gone before seemed to conspire toward the realization of this event."[356] The revelatory power of religious discourse allows for individuals and communities to refigure the whole of their reality and their modes of encountering it. The line of thought that Ricoeur is here following comes close to the view of certain authors who believed that the world of art should "project a world with a peculiar logic of its own, which in turn 'illuminates the actual world, because it gives us a new point of view from which to inspect it.'"[357] But because reorientation via revelation is always reached through this hermeneutic circle, the religious believer's understanding of reality is always conditioned by her belief. Any account that she can give of her understanding of the world is therefore confessional, it is necessarily given from the perspective of a believer. Niebuhr points out that the religious believer "can proceed only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and *what we see from our point of view.*"[358]

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[356] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59.

[357] Sanford Schwartz, "Hermeneutics and the Productive Imagination: Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 63, no. 3. (July, 1983): 298. Schwartz is citing T.S. Eliot.

[358] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21.

A charge may be leveled here that our reading of Ricoeur leads to an interpretation of religion where various religions are playing different language-games[359] and are thus incommensurable (i.e., one could never say whether one religion can make more sense of reality than another). However, it does not follow that this is the case. "For Ricoeur, the truth of biblical narrative does not inhabit its own autonomous language game; these stories present publicly intelligible – if extremely complex and ambitious – claims about what is the case."[360] While understanding of reality never is absolute, it is also not a private language-game of a particular religion. A member of one faith, via the powers of imagination and by entering the hermeneutic circle to an extent, will be able to understand (in some capacity) how a member of another faith understands the world. Ricoeur notes that in the Gospel of Mark there is a progressive recognition of the identity of Jesus as the Christ. So there is a sense in which the Gospel is not merely an account of the "life, teaching work, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but the communicating of an act of confession, a communication by means of which the reader in turn is rendered capable of performing the same recognition that occurs inside the text."[361] Indeed, the text calls for the appropriation of Jesus as the Christ for the reader, just as the actors

[359] The term 'language-game' comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein. For our purposes here, it is enough to see that when involved in a game, for instance, football, there are rules and terminology that apply only to that particular game and cannot be meaningfully outside of that context. It would be meaningless at a basketball game to say that a player is "offsides" or to ask how many touchdowns one of the players had scored. The argument that could be leveled against Ricoeur would then amount to saying that various religions and their corresponding ways of understanding the world (employing certain concepts, terminology, etc.) are so radically different that they could never be compared in any meaningful sense.

[360] Comstock, "Truth or Meaning," 135.

[361] Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," 162.

in the Gospel had.[362] As noted above, imagination has the ability "to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world."[363]

For example, the Buddhist will be able to understand that the Christian may make sense of various mythological themes as the echoes or foreshadowings of their orienting event as evidence of its truth: the Suffering Servant,[364] the sacrificing of animals as substitution for human blood sacrifice, the incarnation of deities and various other mythical themes. Perhaps she will also be able to make sense of her personal suffering or the suffering of humanity writ large. Perhaps the ability to understand the truth in other faiths will be important. Perhaps the ability to utilize and employ the truths of other religions in her own religion is important. The Buddhist is free to agree or to disagree with the Christian's interpretation of such information. The point is that they are talking *about something which they can disagree* and *they can and do disagree*. The Buddhist, the Muslim, the Christian, etc. are all speaking *about reality* and true and false claims can be made of that reality. Indeed, the act of proselytizing is just such a call of one believer to an other – "come, see from my perspective and see how sense can be made of your life and the world you live in." For example, when the Buddhist invokes the concept of reincarnation, he is making a claim about how the way the world actually works. He does not think that he is just expressing his own desires, but saying something about reality. The Christian, in denying the actuality of reincarnation, is taking the Buddhist claim *seriously*. The Christian understands that the Buddhist is talking about the nature of reality, just like she is with

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[362] Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," 162, footnote.

[363] Paul Ricoeur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 128.

[364] Cf. Ricoeur's tantalizing remark in his Reply to David Detmer in Hahn's *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 495.

her religious beliefs. In this manner, such disagreements are the natural outcome of religious believers taking each other seriously. To deny that such disagreements actually exist is to run the risk of patronizing or ignoring that one or the other of the two truth claims is expressing something about reality.

So there is a cognitive element that exists in religious language that cannot be done away with. The cognitive element of religious discourse emphasizes that religious believers are not merely articulating subjective emotive states or values (for example, the statement “God exists” does not mean “I value love and justice” to the believer) but are rather making claims about the nature of reality. To impose upon a believer something that is foreign to his own understanding of himself (i.e., saying that her statement “God exists” is really only a statement about her own values) is something that should be avoided whenever possible. Religious believers take themselves as asserting things about reality and as scholars we should take them at their word.[365] But this discussion seems to imply the further question ‘can one religion create a better orientation than another?’

Because any religious account of reality or claims of the efficacy of a particular mode of being-in-the-world is necessarily confessional, we fall upon the work of testimony to discern productive orientation in reality and toward the Sacred. Here too a cognitive element is found for Ricoeur: “testimony requires interpretation…. It needs to be tested…. We must always

[365] I have no interest in making any strong claims here about anthropological or sociological methodology, especially in light of the difficulties that have arisen in deciphering apparently nonsensical statements by religious believers (for example, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s work with the Bororo). However, I take it as fairly obvious that one should always try to understand a person as they would like to be understood, while acknowledging the fact that there may be limit situations where this is difficult to do.

decide between the false witness and the truthful one."[366] That is, in hearing the testimony of another, there is a critical element, one must undertake a project of reflective repetition on what is said and determine for oneself about the veracity of the claims. One is called by the act of testimony to

> assume that this speaking is meaningful, that it is worth of consideration, and that examining it may accompany and guide the transfer from the text to life where it will verify itself fully…. how do I avoid the famous circle of believing in order to understand and understanding in order to believe? I do not seek to avoid it. I boldly stay within this circle in the hope that, through the transfer from text to life, what I have risked will be returned a hundredfold as an increase in comprehension, valor, and joy.[367]

For the religious believer (and, for that matter, any person who is adopting a particular worldview) there is value in adopting a certain faith as one's own. The revelation of a way of being in the world and of seeing reality is no small matter – neither is the adoption of a certain worldview. But we are led to the truth of confession by what is revealed – does this religion allow for correct orientation toward the Sacred? Does it correctly name God? By orienting myself by the empty tomb, the gaze of the deity, the submission to Allah, do I see the reality I find myself in more comprehensible? Niebuhr writes, "[t]he kingdom proves itself to be the kingdom of God not only by its immediate worth but also by its instrumental value in leading to secondary goods, and revelation proves itself to be revelation of reality not only by its intrinsic veracity but also by its ability to guide men to many other truths."[368]

Through the revelation of confessional discourse one encounters a new way of understanding the world and oneself. But one cannot sit back and objectively consider the merits

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[366] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 33.

[367] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 217.

[368] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74.

of one's own belief system standing over against the merits of another. Rather, the only possible mode of rational evaluation for humans is for us to bring along the tools for evaluation that we have, the same that let us recognize weaknesses in our own systems and the virtues of another. But how do we employ them? Ricoeur suggests that the only way we can do this is through an imaginative entering in to a new system. In order to understand, one must believe. Ricoeur formulates his hermeneutic circle as the following: one must understand in order to believe, but one must believe to understand.[369] One "buys in," if only temporarily and takes on the resources that are offered by one's interlocutor. In doing so, one must

> quit the position, or better, the exile, of the remote and disinterested spectator, in order to appropriate in each case an individual symbolism. Then is discovered what may be called the circle of hermeneutics…. This circle is not vicious, sill less deadly; it is quite alive and stimulating. You must believe in order to understand. No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live the *aura* of the meaning that is sought. And yet it is only in understanding that we can believe.[370]

Here Ricoeur introduces what he entitles the "hermeneutic wager." The hermeneutic wager is the conscious entering of a hermeneutic circle – believing in order to understand. In throwing myself into a possible world I am wagering "that I shall have a better understanding of man and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings."[371] The wager is immediately transformed into the task of verifying itself by an increase in intelligibility, of "detecting and deciphering human reality", in short, an increase in understanding.[372]

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[369] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 351.

[370] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols," 45–46.

[371] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

[372] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

There is always a leap of faith to be made in adopting a religious faith, and it is not one without risk. For the believer (in this case the Christian), faith "is the overthrowing of the guarantee, it is the risk of life placed under the sign of the suffering Christ… It is to accept knowing just one thing about God, that God was present in and is to be identified with Jesus Christ."[373] Because nothing can be known in certainty about God, one must risk one's entire life in the hope that throughout the course of this life one can live in such a way as to be able to be a living testimony to yourself and others of the efficacy of the name of God that you have called upon. In wagering our lives upon a name of God, it is impossible to eliminate "'the element of risk. We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; *verification is therefore a question of our whole life*. No one can escape this… I do not see how we can say that our values are better than all others except that *by risking our whole life on them we expect to achieve a better life, to see and to understand things better than others.*'"[374]

But neither is the leap necessarily blind or irrational. The risk of imaginatively entering into another belief system is rational because one recognizes the breaks, inconsistencies and insufficient answers in one's own beliefs. Moreover, once one enters into a new belief system, and orients oneself in it, there is a direct mode of comparison between two worldviews. One may find there resources that one's own belief system does not offer. It may provide the wherewithal to answer the unsolved questions in one's own beliefs. Or it may not! In either

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[373] Paul Ricoeur, "'Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 288. Ricoeur is citing Eberhard Jungel.

[374] Mark I. Wallace, "Can God Be Named without Being Known? The Problem of Revelation in Thiemann, Ogden, and Ricoeur." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* vol. 59, no. 2. (Summer, 1991): 301–302. Wallace is citing Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 312. Emphasis mine.

case, there is no complete gestalt between the two systems, but rather largely similarity of beliefs. Those aspects of the new system that look superior to one are seen as such on the basis of the beliefs that one already holds. Hence the moment of recognition – "this is what I meant to believe all along; what is here is better than the shreds of truth and goodness that I had before but is what they all pointed to." And here is precisely what we may call true revelation: "Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible."[375] Or as C.S. Lewis puts it, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."[376] Revelation is thus the moment in which, not that all of one's old beliefs are cast off, but that some new thing, different, yet strangely familiar, comes in and puts everything else in its proper place. It is this better orientation in the world towards self, others and God that we properly can call revelation. Conversion on such a basis is surely, if anything is, rational.

[375] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 50.

[376] C.S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 106.

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